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Under Pressure: Work-Life Balance in the “Always On University”

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The complex and demanding nature of faculty work and the associated challenges of maintaining work-life balance are well-known (e.g., Lester, 2013; O’Meara & Campbell, 2011). Despite the increased presence of policies designed to meet those challenges (e.g., parental leave), faculty remain dissatisfied with their ability to balance work and non-work demands. For instance, a recent survey of nearly 30,000 faculty from 65 institutions, revealed that 28% of men and 40% of women do not feel that they have been able to find the right balance between their professional and personal lives (COACHE, 2017).

The competing demands of work and home appear to disproportionately affect women, who report lower levels of job satisfaction and more difficulty balancing teaching, research, and service responsibilities (Misra, Lundquist, & Templer, 2012; Smith & Calasanti, 2005). Part of this disparity reflects the fact that women continue to bear the brunt of care-giving and domestic duties at home (Misra et al. 2012; Winslow 2010). Importantly, though, several features of the academic work environment also contribute to this disparity by increasing both actual and perceived work demands for women and reducing their perceptions of job control. Consider the following examples.

Women tend to provide more departmental and institutional service (Guarino & Borden, 2017) and receive more new work requests (O’Meara, Kuvaeva, Nyunt, Jackson, & Waugaman, 2017) than men. This work tends to be viewed as “housekeeping” (e.g., committee assignments, advising) that is undervalued, provides limited visibility, and is not integrated into their scholarship or teaching (O’Meara, Kuvaeva, and Nyunt, 2017). The latter yields inefficiencies in time allocation, necessitating longer work hours if they are to fulfill research and teaching expectations (O’Meara et al., 2017).

Women also spend a greater percentage of their workweek on teaching than men, for reasons not explained by preferences or institutional attributes (Winslow, 2010). Women are more likely to teach lower-level (and higher enrollment) courses while men in their departments teach smaller, upper division seminars. Women also report greater solicitation of standard work demands and special favor requests from students, such as emailing with course-related questions, dropping by the office without an appointment, or overseeing independent studies (El-Alayli, Hansen-Brown, & Ceynar, 2017). On net, women interface with more students and those students expect them to be more available. When they are not, women can be penalized

on evaluations, often the only means of assessing teaching performance. As a result, they may reluctantly agree to accommodate requests, further adding to their work demands.

Finally, women tend to be less certain than men that they will get tenure at their institution (COACHE, 2014). They are also less likely to believe they “have received consistent messages from tenured faculty about the requirements for tenure” and that “tenure decisions are made primarily on performance-based criteria rather than on non-performance.” The lack of clarity and support regarding these criteria may fuel the belief that they must work harder and do more to not just meet but exceed promotion and tenure thresholds. These perceptions may be exacerbated by a (Western) culture that affords men a level of credibility and competence not extended to women. This disparity is oft displayed in academia, as men are regarded as “professors” and women as “teachers” (Miller & Chamberlin, 2000).

Taken together, workload inequities, implicit biases, and unclear performance standards may adversely affect women faculty in ways that increase both perceived *and* actual work demands and decrease perceptions of job control, further straining their ability to maintain work-life balance. This context is important to consider as it sets the backdrop for understanding the implications of technology use in the “always on university.” As Kossek and Lautsch (2012) argued, characteristics of the social context are likely to affect how employees' boundary management behaviors and their personal preference interact to affect work- and health-related outcomes.

The Link between Technology Use and Work-Life Balance for Faculty

Advancements in information and communications technologies (ICTs), including smart phones, laptops and tablets, and web-based collaborative tools have reshaped the workplace by affording employees the opportunity to connect and collaborate anywhere, anytime (Leung, 2011). The ubiquity of ICTs and their impact on work behaviors are startling. A 2011 iPass Report shows that 95% of 2,300 survey respondents from across the globe own a smartphone and that 91% use it for work, often off hours.³ This compares to just 3% of respondents who do not work outside of office hours. Research shows that ICTs can make work more interesting, increase productivity, and reduce work-home conflict (Kelly Services, 2009; Towers, Duxbury, & Thomas, 2005). At the same time, ICT use enables around the clock access to work, which threatens the ability to detach. This can increase stress, work-home conflict, and burnout (Sarker, Xiao, Sarker, & Ahuja, 2012).

³ <http://mobile-workforce-project.ipass.com/reports/q4-report-2011> (downloaded 1/25/12)

The conflicting findings regarding the outcomes of ICT use may be resolved by considering the context in which ICTs are used. First, individuals may use technology-driven tactics to manage the work-home boundary in ways that meet their preferences and needs (Fenner & Renn, 2009; Furst-Holloway & Bologna, 2017). Some tactics promote integration (e.g., downloading work emails onto a mobile device while off hours) while others create greater segmentation (e.g., setting limits on when to use technology off-hours). Notably, these tactics reflect intentional efforts to use ICTs in ways to regain job control by aligning how one manages the work-home boundary with their actual boundary preferences. Thus, these tactics may be particularly important for women faculty who report larger time allocation mismatches than men—that is, their actual time allocations to both teaching and research diverge more from their preferred time allocations than those of men (Winslow, 2010).

Second, the efficacy of these tactics may vary as a function of departmental or institutional norms. Strong organizational integration norms imply that employees are expected to take work home and be available for work off-hours – as opposed to a workplace that allows or permits employees to keep work matters at work (Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2005; Kossek, Colquitt, & Noe, 2001). Research, to date, has not explored integration norms in the academy. Yet, evidence suggests that those norms may be quite strong given a normative expectation that the “ideal scientist” views work as a calling, prioritizes it over other roles, and pursues research single-mindedly (Bailyn, 2003; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004).

Strong integration norms tend to pressure employees to stay connected and engaged in work off-hours, particularly when ICTs make those connections so accessible (Derks et al., 2014; Schieman & Glavin, 2017). This pressure can be detrimental. In fact, emerging research suggests that the *pressure* to be available and responsive creates greater stress and work-home conflict than actually engaging in work off-hours (Furst-Holloway et al., 2016). Further, when integration norms are lower, the relationship between off hours work and work-life conflict is diminished, particularly for those who prefer integration (Gadeyn et al., 2018). Said differently, when employees integrate by choice not obligation, conflict lessens and psychological detachment increases (Mellner, 2016).

Despite burgeoning evidence regarding pressures to be available and connected, the trend toward greater technology access, flexibility, and integration continues unabated. As the preceding findings suggest, more attention is needed to identify the organizational norms, practices, and policies that can preserve productivity and performance while protecting faculty from the psychological and physiological effects of anywhere, anytime work. This may be

particularly true for women given what we know about the gendered work environment in academe.

Implications for the “Always On University”

To be clear, there is no shortage of work-life policies within the academy, including parental leaves, stop-the-tenure-clock policies, childcare support, and part-time work. However, these policies are often underused (Lundquist et al. 2012; Mason et al. 2013), in part because they are embedded in unsupportive, patriarchal cultures that devalue parenthood and caregiving at the expense of institutional and disciplinary standards that further prestige (Lester 2015; O’Meara & Campbell 2011). More problematic is that these policies do not address the daily work-life challenges faculty face in managing myriad and often conflicting demands and the intrusions across work and home boundaries made more permeable by ICTs.

Consistent with the literature on family supportive supervisory behaviors (FSSB; Hammer et al., 2007), research does show that support from senior departmental colleagues and institutional leaders, as well as the presence of family-friendly department norms and role models can bolster faculty’s agency (i.e., perceptions of job control) in balancing their academic and home lives (Lester 2015; O’Meara & Campbell, 2011). More research is needed to understand these behaviors in the context of ICTs and around the clock accessibility. In addition to gathering baseline information on integration preferences and pressures for responsiveness, departments might design and test a series of interventions based on lessons learned from the FSSB literature. For example:

- In what ways can departmental leadership and senior colleagues **role model** appropriate ICT-related behaviors?
- In what ways can departments or institutions demonstrate **instrumental support** for ICT utilization by setting expectations for students, staff, and faculty, around response time and around the clock availability? What would such interventions look like (e.g., language in syllabi, email signatures)?

While the preceding efforts apply to all faculty, additional research is needed to understand how ICTs and connectivity affect the ability of women faculty to better manage work-life demands. For instance:

- When women engage in more service and teaching, they are – ipso facto – increasing the number of connections they have and thus the number of people to whom they must be responsive (O’Meara et al., 2017). Thus, irrespective of integration norms and pressures to be responsive, it is necessary to address inequities in workload, subjective performance criteria, and uncertainties regarding tenure and promotion requirements

that might subconsciously fuel pressures to do more and (especially) to be more available and “present.”

- Research should explore whether differences exist between men and women (both students and faculty) with respect to ICT utilization, expectations for others’ responsiveness, and their own internalized pressures to respond. To the extent that differences emerge, training interventions can be developed to help these stakeholders understand sources of bias and to develop more equitable expectations and practices that level the playing field.
- Research examining faculty experiences from an intersectional perspective indicates that work-life balance varies as a function of both race and gender (Denson, Szelényi, & Bresonis, 2018). To be true, faculty possess multiple identities (e.g., scientist, teacher, parent, African American, lesbian, gardener, fitness junky) that likely inform how they approach their work and respond to work experiences. Research is thus needed that examines how demands associated with the always on university affect faculty from this multiple identity lens.

In closing, advancements in technology undoubtedly expand the capability of institutions and faculty to be more innovative, broaden collaboration networks, and be more flexible in attending to academic and personal demands. Yet, these advancements do not come without potential costs in terms of coordination and integration challenges. To date, research and practice in this area have largely (albeit not exclusively) outside of the higher education setting. The hope is that the ideas presented here might stimulate new research – both basic and applied – to advance this work.

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