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Parenting Policies and Culture in Academia and Beyond: Making It While Mothering (and Fathering) in the Academy, and What COVID-19 Has to Do with It

For those of us involved in MIRCI, it is no surprise that being a mother in academia is often seen as a liability. In fact, Anna Young found that “no other industry has a higher ‘leak’ rate for mothers” than academia, and she surmises this is partly because “the upper echelons of the academy are still overwhelmingly dominated by men”—a cultural institution that historically has been “a place by and for men” (x). Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequities in our workplaces. As a matter of maternal health and reproductive freedom, academic mothers must be considered in policies in academia. This article will examine necessary policy and culture shifts that can help mothers in the academy while also discussing personal and local decisions that can be made by those with institutional power that can immediately improve the conditions of mothers in the academy. Of course, we should continue to push for larger systemic changes—such as fair parental leave policies and quality as well as affordable universal child care that need to happen at a societal level—but until those developments are a given, we should work on the following steps, which will be expanded below: 1) Individual choices to not bifurcate our lives into parenting and scholarship; 2) reappointment, tenure, and promotion (RTP) decisions recognizing the importance of interdisciplinary and autoethnographical scholarship, along with enforcing policies and transparency around tolling or stopping the tenure clock and fair research productivity expectations; 3) tolling policies to account for the time needed for the parenting of young children, with options for being part-time on the tenure track or remote teaching possibilities; 4) local decisions to provide intentional community and friendship to parents as

well as dedicated space for breastfeeding mothers and children on campus; and 5) sensible scheduling. Our ultimate goal must be larger systemic changes towards parental leave and childcare that will grant the types of policies that will help all parents. In the meantime, we need to use everything we have to help our colleagues who are raising the next generation.

For those of us involved in MIRCI, it is no surprise that being a mother in academia is often seen as a liability. Anna Young reports that “There is a consistent talent leak in the professorial pipeline,” because academic mothers are leaving even as the number women in the academy has more than doubled from 1990 to 2010 (ix). According to Young, 61 per cent of male professors are tenured, whereas only 43 per cent of women professors are. Furthermore, women account for only one-fifth of faculty positions but comprise 40 per cent of all “voluntary” departures, in which academic women leave prior to a negative tenure decision; a full 75 per cent of full professors are men (Young ix). Outcomes for mothers are even bleaker than they are for women; mothers who opt to stay in the academy are far more likely to be second tier—that is, they occupy adjunct and contingent faculty positions (Young x). Even more disturbing is the information that fathers fare far better than mothers in academia; far from a “baby penalty,” fathers receive an actual career boost (Young x). There is an evident mother penalty in academia, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated it. Maternal health is impacted by workplace and social policies that too often harm mothers and caregivers. Academia should be a champion of equitable worker practices, but all too often, the scarcity of jobs and unforgiving nature of the tenure clock and its timing do not actually allow mothers to find fulfilling and remunerative careers, despite their training and qualifications.

Until the COVID-19 pandemic, facts like those listed above were rarely highlighted; the age-old reputation of the academy being a masculine place still has teeth. Young’s finding of the “maternal leak” points to the fact that “the upper echelons of the academy are still overwhelmingly dominated by men,” and academia itself is a cultural institution that has historically been “a place ... for men” (Young x). It is unfortunate that it has taken a global pandemic and changing working conditions for academics everywhere for *The Chronicle* and *Inside Higher Ed* to start taking seriously the plight of academic mothers. I left my campus on March 10, 2020, knowing I would not be back for a while, but I never dreamed the pandemic would upend life as completely as it has for academe at large. We have the potential in this moment of a near universal health crisis to take stock and consider how to be better. Specifically, we need to consider what we should be doing for academic mothers and academic parents more broadly. Due to the current impact of COVID-19 on academic mothers, this article examines some ways in which the pandemic has

exacerbated and underlined the need for reform in academia. This article outlines the necessary policy and culture shifts that can help mothers in the academy; it discusses the personal and local decisions that can improve the conditions of mothers in the academy while waiting for larger systemic changes.

Most of the information regarding academic mothers' responses to the COVID-19 crisis in this article has been drawn from my survey about academic parents during the pandemic. Over the course of two weeks in early May 2020, 221 respondents, 216 of whom are mothers, responded to the survey. The desire to talk about the inequities for mothers in academia, particularly under the new crisis, was a welcome outlet for the many I was able to reach through various Facebook academic mom groups. The survey, which has Institutional Review Board (IRB) exempt status¹, makes no claims of being a representative sample of academic parents. Of the respondents, 201 are currently partnered, with only seven being in a nonheterosexual relationship. Seventy-nine of the respondents are promoted and tenured faculty, and seventy-eight respondents are tenure-track faculty (not yet tenured). Twenty-eight respondents are in fulltime contingent or fixed-term (nontenure-track) positions, seven are part-time faculty, twenty are graduate students, and eight listed themselves as administrators. (Some did not answer this question.) The respondents come from every type of institution, but the largest majority (110) are from a large public institution. A total of 144 respondents, or 67 per cent of the sample, have a household income of over \$100,000 annually, and thirty-nine make between \$75,000 and \$99,999. We are clearly talking about a group of respondents with some privilege, yet their concerns and fears about their professional and personal lives under COVID-19 are palpable in their responses.

Despite the clear hurdles existing for women in academia (even prior to the pandemic), mothers are still making it. As Sara M. Childers writes, "There are far too many of us to anymore view it as impossible" (124). Young notes that motherhood can have benefits for scholars. The added responsibility of mothering, and therefore, the pressure to manage time well, is a necessity for mothers. There is evidence to show that mother-academics are actually better at time management and finding strategies that allow them to be even more productive after motherhood than before (Young viii). Mother-academics, such as Childers, Elizabeth Rose Gruner, Tara McDonald Johnson, and Venitha Pillay, just to name a few, note the importance of rejecting the bifurcation of the two roles—mother and scholar, body and brain. Instead, they advocate for the productivity that occurs when mothering is "inscribed" into their scholarship (Pillay 1). I myself can attest to the increased productivity of mothering on my research and writing; not only did I have to find ways to be more organized and fruitful, but I also found that I had more to say. There

was more at stake when I inscribed my mothering self onto my academic self. Still, as mothers we often deal with not only policies that fail us and our chance for success but also individual attitudes and a culture that fails to make room for the duality of our lives as mother-scholars. Since fully embodying both parts of that false binary is key to our success, we need to find ways to make being a mother and scholar simultaneously more doable, healthy, and productive.

Too often, the work of changing our culture (be that our department or university culture or the culture at large) seems far too insurmountable to take on, so we focus instead on the changes we can control individually. Childers suggests this leads to us “covering” our mothering selves inside our profession to make ourselves and others more comfortable (111). In addition to covering our mothering, we may also feel that we need to be superwomen—unimpeachable in our attendance to all of our duties and responsibilities, unflappable in a crisis (at home or at work), and productive to the point of exceeding all expectations so that we can have a “slam dunk” in our professional pursuit of promotions. Women (and other marginalized faculty) “believe that they must be twice as good to go half as far” (Castañeda and Hames-Garcia 272).

This need to “cover” our mothering has reached new heights for many under the pandemic. A swift and prodigious backlash erupted when Kristie Kiser posted her article, “Instructors, Please Wash Your Hair,” on *Inside Higher Ed* arguing that “the last thing that students need to see is their professional, highly educated professor falling apart at the seams” (par. 1). The comments rightfully point out that the burden of professional appearance falls disproportionately on women, particularly BBIPOC (Black, Brown Indigenous, People of Color) women, and Kiser’s article points specifically to the assumed horror of piles of dirty laundry in the background of a Zoom meeting and implies that a less than tidy home (which of course is far more likely to exist when multiple children also live in the home and require care) can lead to accusations by students and others of unprofessionalism. Zoom backgrounds can, of course, mask the reality of a mother’s home, but how can academic mothers be expected to function at full capacity when they are expected to participate in any number of “pointless” online meetings without childcare and any other type of domestic help during the pandemic (Willey). Respondents to my COVID-19 survey asked that institutions provide “flexibility with the nonstop web meetings” or recognize that due to the lack of childcare, not everyone will be able to easily meet via computer during normal business hours. Sorting through academic mothers’ responses to the pandemic, it becomes clear that most mothers, especially mothers of younger children, need childcare and domestic help to continue their work as mother-scholars.

Even with many challenges—more so in this historical moment—productive mothers in academia are not an anomaly. Many of us have exceeded by a long shot our colleagues’ productivity because we know better than most that each day is unpredictable in how it unfolds, so we must make every moment count. And we do. Mothers are among the least likely, in my experience, to hold onto largely false myths of needing four hours of uninterrupted time to really get any writing done, as I have heard some of my nonmother counterparts explain. Mothers know how to schedule and utilize time when they can, even in fifteen minute bursts, to get their research and writing done. We have learned how to manage our work lives in the same way we manage our home lives—with flexibility and grit and some good humour thrown in. Of course, the ability to reach this level of productivity is predicated on the notion that mother-scholars have some space and time of their own to work. Of the 221 respondents (not all of whom were research active prior to the pandemic), fifty-eight lost ten or more hours a week of research time, whereas fifty-three lost five hours of research time per week. The reasons for these losses are myriad and include more time spent on online/remote teaching and preparation, stress and lack of concentration due to pandemic worries, and the literal loss of lab access; however, the most clear reason for the loss of time for many had to do with loss of childcare coupled with homeschooling children and an increase in domestic labour. The most common estimate of the additional time spent on domestic labour, including cooking and cleaning, of the respondents was an additional five to six hours per week for sixty-seven respondents, eight to thirty hours for fifty-one respondents, and even more hours for thirty respondents. One of the latter respondents did not even know how many extra hours she spent on domestic labour: “God only knows. I spend my days in a nightmare of fruitlessly attempting to do my job, but I end up full-time taking care of the home and family” (Willey). A total of 154 respondents, or 70 per cent of the total sample, said they spend seven or more hours a week on new childcare duties they did not have before COVID-19, with the range capping out at over sixty hours a week. Although many mothers (especially prior to the pandemic) have succeeded in academe, the current conditions show that without real institutional and societal help, mothers may be facing insurmountable challenges working in the academy.

We make individual choices and changes to our work lives to accommodate our families. Although life will most likely never exist as we knew it before the pandemic, someday we will return our children to daycare and school, and we will teach and interact in person again. At that point, we can utilize individual choices that will help mothers succeed. We can learn that the binary of mother-scholar is false and that we are always both. We are not “heads on a stick” (Gruner 128), nor are we only embodied mothers, who are stereotyped to be “nature, feminine, bodily, irrational and wild” and the anathema to

scholars, who are seen to be “masculine, logical, and rational” (Childers 115). We are fully mothers and scholars, and many of us weave our maternity into our scholarship and our scholarly minds into our mothering. Some of us write while holding children. (My copy of *Mama PhD*, which I opened for the citation above from Gruner, is full of my son Isaac’s scribbles, who must have been about two the last time I used that book.) We might think while rocking babies and nursing. Or we might see a problem one of our children is having through the lens of our studies, or we might actually write our children into our scholarship. I have done all of the above. There is no question in my mind that being a mother has made me not only more productive with my time but also a better scholar, thinker, and writer. Furthermore, I believe I am a better mother due to my ability to apply my critical lenses to my mothering.

But these individual choices are not enough. I must note that even as a scholar-mother of older children, fifteen and twelve at the time of writing, who has many privileges in my job security and who enjoys a safe and comfortable home, I have had a terrible time concentrating enough to read and write under these pandemic conditions. Writing the revisions for this chapter, for instance, took about twice as many hours than is typical for me. I trust that one day, I will learn how to produce under COVID-19, and I also trust that at some point, we will open our lives again to others in a way that will feed our minds and hearts—professionally and personally. Right now, the spectre of the global pandemic, along with the global Black Lives Matter movement, is showing some of my previous calculations about parental policies in academe to be overly simplistic. Yet we must take what we have learned from this moment and then find a way to move forward.

I have had the great fortune to be involved with this group, MIRCI, and its sister, Demeter Press, as a member, presenter, writer, editor, and reviewer for almost twenty years. When I was building my case for my promotion to full professor, I looked for scholars doing similar work to list as external reviewers, some of whom are members of this organization. At some point in the promotion process, Andrea O’Reilly told me that it is our job, as senior scholars, to shepherd in the next generation of mother-scholars. Mother-scholars know that we did not get where we are alone. We also know that just because it might have been hard for us to make it, we should still strive to make it easier for the next generation. One of the projects of my feminism, of my mothering inside the academy, has been to create and run a faculty mentoring program on my local campus. In that capacity, I can do individual work (importantly, this work is supported by the administration, who gives me load to offset my teaching work) to help individuals, and that has value. But I can and do also try to effect cultural and policy changes that will make individual help less crucial. Our ultimate goal should be to create an academic culture that makes discussions about the “mommy track” as well as discussions

about the inequities mothers face in the system unnecessary, a thing of the past. I believe we are in a moment where we can truly see the weaknesses inherent in our system, so we can clearly look toward a future that will be more equitable for mother-scholars and other marginalized members of the academy.

Making the mommy track, with its “voluntary” separations and less academic success, disappear might actually mean first recognizing that parents of any gender should have parity in parental leave policies. We know that for women, biologically fertile ages coincide closely with the tenure clock (Loveday and Brander par. 2), which makes achieving both parenthood and success in the academy especially difficult for mothers. Mothers, of course, must almost always bear the children, so they cannot “cover” their parent status in the same way that fathers and nonbiological parents can. Still, if we know that generous parental leave helps mothers recover from birth, bond with their children, and get healthy (read: not sleep deprived, not in pain, and not suffering from postpartum depression), then we know it will help them succeed. If parental leaves cover not only job security but also guarantee pay, then economic stressors are less of a factor on families, enabling everyone’s wellbeing. As Emma Kate Loveday and Susanne Brander write:

A number of studies demonstrate the numerous benefits associated with paid leave for both men and women. Sufficient leave paves the way for a smoother transition back to work as well as better outcomes for parents and their babies. Paid leave reduces infant mortality by up to 10 percent, and women are less likely to experience depression even later in life. Children receive higher rates of immunization and increased breastfeeding duration. Paternity leave is becoming more common, *and men who take paid leave continue to share in child-rearing responsibilities years later, changing the long term dynamics of their families as well as shaping their children’s chances of succeeding in school.* (my emphasis, par. 13)

Generous maternal leave should be a given in our push for better policies that enable both maternal health and academic mothers’ professional success, but we must work towards parity in parental leave for fathers and other caregivers as well. With generous parental leave, fathers, as well as other nonbiological parents, can take their parenting duties seriously without fear of reprisal or economic uncertainty. This move, if taken seriously by all parents, will actually shift the larger gender dynamics at play in many families that delegate childcare and domestic duties primarily to women. If both mothers and fathers regularly take leave, if it becomes the norm because it is financially and professionally feasible, eventually it will not seem like an anomaly, as if it is something only (struggling) mothers do. When it is advisable, and when

there are two parents, parental leave can be staggered, leading to even better childcare coverage for the first part of the baby's life and giving peace of mind to the entire family. Creating a norm that allows for generous parental leave for all parents legitimizes every parent's role in their child's crucial (and often comparatively difficult) early life.

We might have a few knee jerk (and somewhat justified) responses to the idea of expanding parental leave to all parents of any gender. First of all, we might assume that mother-scholars who are partnered are more likely to be in equitable partnerships. Academic mothers are by definition highly educated achievers. Considering the time they put into training and the vagaries of the academic job search, we might be forgiven for assuming that if they are partnered, they would only agree to a partnership that places an equal emphasis on both partner's careers and on the requisite sharing of household and childcare duties. But even feminist partnerships can be thrown onto shaky ground with the birth of a child. Only the biological mother's body had to carry the infant for nine months, and only the biological mother's body can literally continue to feed the baby, if the parents are committed to breastfeeding. Plans to somehow equalize childcare duties can take a back seat to survival in those early months, particularly when the infant might be bonding more with the biological mother than the other parent. Additionally, if the partner continues to work without leave, she or he might not understand how gruelling time at home alone with a baby or toddler can be, and briefly taking over during an evening or on the weekend never fully relays the challenges of the primary parent. My own early parenting is a clear case of testing the bounds of equitable and feminist parenting practices. My partner and I are on the same page now, but in the early years, especially prior to the birth of our second baby and despite our joint commitment to feminism, all was not equitable or well. One of my first personal essays was written in response to this period in our lives ("Anger in the House").

But this is far from my personal story alone, and if anything has laid bare the problems of inequity in partnerships, especially parenting ones, it is the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent article from *The Guardian* shows that "Working mothers have been able to do only one hour of uninterrupted paid work for every three hours done by men during lockdown" (Topping par. 1). Of the 201 respondents to my survey who are partnered, 115 of them believe their partners are only doing somewhere between one and four more hours of domestic labour per week, and 33 of them report no extra labour by their partner. Showing more involvement with childcare, eighty-one partners are reported to be doing somewhere between seven and fifty more hours per week of child care since COVID-19, with only twenty-seven partners showing no change, and fifty-eight performing between one and four hours more. Compared with the 70 per cent of respondents who report spending more

than seven extra hours per week on childcare duties since COVID-19, approximately 36 per cent of partners are perceived as really picking up extra parenting duties during this crisis.

Understandably, then, tensions often run high in households that outsourced domestic and childcare duties or where slight gender disparities were ignored are now all too obvious as well as all too damaging to the careers of academic mothers. In response to the open-ended statement “Please share your biggest concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on your home and family life,” twenty-seven respondents explicitly mentioned the unfair division of labour inside their homes. One respondent astutely noted her concern about a new pattern developing in which “we will develop new norms for division of labor that will be hard to undo in the future” (Willey). Another participant wrote the following: “Gender inequities in childcare and domestic work have become more apparent and more unequal. My concern is that because I took on this burden at this time, it sets a precedent for these inequities to continue” (Willey). Labour issues also cropped up throughout the text-based answers to other questions as well; for instance, when asked if they were caring for adults in their home, one respondent quipped, “Does an inept husband count?” (Willey).

Providing parental leave policies that equally impact all parents can seem troubling to biological mothers who often assume most of the care for a newborn. A long-standing concern that is unfortunately being proven more clearly during COVID-19 is that academic mothers are not only falling behind, but some men are actually getting research boosts during this crisis, which supports the idea that men taking a leave can actually harm mothers. If men, as the anecdotal evidence suggests, actually use their leave to create more research, then it hurts academic mothers who, by comparison, actually need to use their leave to recover and be a primary caregiver.

A quick Google search found four articles on the effects of COVID-19 on research productivity by men and women. The realities of the coronavirus shelter in place orders have meant that domestic and childcare labour have increased for many and that professional labour—particularly in the realm of teaching remotely but also in the form of increased meetings and email—has decreased the amount of hours mother-scholars have for research. As mentioned previously, 111 respondents indicate they have lost five or more hours of research per week. Reasons for the loss of productivity vary greatly; some lack space at home for uninterrupted work and have limited library or archive access, whereas others have had to stop their research for the foreseeable future completely due to lab closures. Of course, many of these issues will be cited by men as well as women, but we know that women are being disproportionately affected. Megan Frederickson writes the following:

Even if women split childcare duties evenly with a supportive partner (like mine), we are still competing with many men who do way less at home. One study of scientists found that men were four times as likely as women to have spouses who work only part-time or not at all. And that was before more women than men lost their jobs because of COVID-19. (par. 9)

Job precarity for mother-academics is exacerbated under coronavirus, and the precarity is further problematized by decreased productivity in relation to men. In another study that demonstrates that women are producing fewer single-authored scholarship journal submissions than men under COVID-19, Colleen Flaherty notes some of the reasons:

It's not that men don't help with all this, or that they're not also individually overwhelmed by work and family life. But women already juggled more domestic and affective, or emotional, labor with their actual work prior to the pandemic. Female academics, as a group, also struggled more with work-work balance, as well: numerous studies show they take on more service work than men and are less protective of their research time, to their detriment. The coronavirus has simply exacerbated these inequities by stripping away what supports women had in place to walk this tightrope, including childcare. (par. 10-12)

It is not surprising, then, that academic mothers are producing less research than most academic men right now, but it will be detrimental to their career trajectories—everything from successful tenure and promotion cases, merit pay increases, and promotion to full professor status are on the line. The effects of the coronavirus on family life are not equal. How can they be when the conditions before coronavirus were not equal?

Yet I will continue to argue for parental leave for all. It is unfortunately true that men will not utilize leave in the same way as women. However, as I have explored elsewhere, one of the best and only ways to break down the reproduction of gender-based family roles is through modelling gender role changes to children through parenting them toward intentional equity (“Raising Men”; “Mothers and Sons”). Not only will making parental leave possible for everyone equalize problems around discrimination by gender within the family and at work—lending authority to every parent, biological or not—it will also allow fathers to bond more closely with their children, understand the labour of parenting, and create more equitable partnerships in the home. This will not happen in every case, nor will it happen quickly, but it is the standard we should be striving to attain, even if some men will take advantage of the situation.

After parental leave is over, childcare is probably the next most important concern of all new parents. We all have and know stories of poor childcare

options, especially the absurdly expensive ones. Although I have heard many purport that universities should provide childcare for their faculty, staff, and students, and have even seen evidence of fruitful partnerships between universities and their academic programming to provide childcare, I am not sure it should be each individual campus's or university's responsibility to provide an actual childcare facility, even though when that works, it is an excellent option. Subsidies for childcare could be a more fruitful avenue to consider. Still, when it comes to childcare (and parental leave), I believe the culture at large should change to make these universal benefits. Keep in mind that the lack of childcare help is one of the primary drivers in women's lack of research productivity under COVID-19; therefore, we absolutely know that quality and affordable childcare is a must for academic mothers. Although the academy needs to change, so do many other industries. The academy is (not surprisingly to many of us) almost archaic in its lack of parental policies (Loveday and Bander par. 7), and this is only emboldened by lax laws in the United States. Canada does quite well, but the United States continues to fall far short, despite the recommendations by the United Nations:

Approximately 50 percent of OECD nations offer at least 14 weeks parental leave, as advocated by UN International Labor Standards since 1952. In contrast, the United States is one of only four countries (also Liberia, Papua New Guinea, Eswatini) lacking mandated leave for new mothers. Our Canadian neighbors qualify for 35 weeks of paid leave, with an optional extension. In Europe, parental leave is a minimum of 14 weeks to a year or more, funded by employer/employee contributions similar to those supporting U.S. unemployment benefits. (Loveday and Brander par. 3)

Some universities do offer paid leave of some type, but these leaves are far from standardized and often fall embarrassingly short where I work in the United States. Cultural momentum for systemic change, not just in academia, is needed for this problem. If we remove the economic and professional uncertainty created by the lack of parental leave, as well as the expense and uncertainty of quality professional childcare (which includes certifications and better pay for childcare workers as well as subsidizing or making universal these services), we will have solved a large part of the parenting crisis for parents of young children not just in the academy but in the society at large. If we do this for all parents, we will begin to remove the liability of mothering in favour of a more equitable and culturally endorsed ideal of all parents taking responsibility for their children, fortified by help from quality daycares. The COVID-19 crisis has shown us that we must address our lack of leave and universal child care systemically and, beyond academia, the need for strong public health policies and universal healthcare.

Until we have universal childcare and universal, and generous, parental leave, universities should feel pressure by senior faculty and administrators (who might be mothers and parents) advocating for their colleagues who are still in need. The recruitment and retention of faculty would no doubt improve with better parental policies; they could cut down on the expensive costs of job searches and turnover that occur when (mostly) mothers decide to leave academia in favor of a better work-life balance. Additionally, universities can create and standardize policies that make lives easier for parents of young children. One prominent tool is the ability to “toll”—or to put a stop or stay on the tenure clock for a year or more—for family and health issues. Universities that provide this option understand, at least at the policy level, that some flexibility is needed for parents who are also on the tenure track. Policy is necessary, but culture must also shift to make mothers feel that tolling without reprisal is possible. I must mention a disturbing trend I have noted in my own university system, and there is some research to support it: men are more likely to be significantly helped in research productivity by tolling for the addition of children, whereas women are hurt. Consider the following situation in the discipline of economics:

The policies led to a 19 percentage-point rise in the probability that a male economist would earn tenure at his first job. In contrast, women’s chances of gaining tenure fell by 22 percentage points. Before the arrival of tenure extension, a little less than 30 percent of both women and men at these institutions gained tenure at their first jobs. The decline for women is therefore very large. It suggests that the new policies made it extraordinarily rare for female economists to clear the tenure hurdle. (Wolfers par. 8)

And this problem has, again, showed up in COVID-19 tolling policies. Many faculty members are still hesitant to use tolling policies for fear that more will be expected of them when they do submit their next file. At my own institution, I have recently been told of additional hurdles being created to achieve tolling status under COVID-19 rather than fewer. As was noted by several survey respondents, “adjusted performance expectations” could be much more helpful than tolling, since this is time no one will ever get back, and stopping the tenure track will simply delay pay raises and job security.

The answer to these problems is not to remove tolling, but to change the reappointment, tenure, and promotion (RTP) culture, which is no small feat. RTP reviewers must be instructed about the importance of the policies, how they work, and what reviewing without prejudice means in light of such policies. Institutions and departments should consider reviewing their expectations for fairness, especially considering current challenges. Culture is hard to change, so strong leaders, especially senior faculty who have been

through the ringer and often without the benefit of tolling, must lead the way. As more women and mothers break through the “Associate Professor Glass Ceiling,” a phrase coined by Mari Castañeda and Michael Hames-Garcia, the culture will continue to shift as newly minted women and mothers will begin making personnel decisions. In the meantime, union representation and strong advocates can be called upon to help demonstrate this unfair disadvantage.

There are other policy changes that universities are uniquely situated to offer, such as truly flexible scheduling options for faculty who are dealing with childcare issues. I do understand that faculty who are not parents, or who are not actively parenting, should not be asked to always keep schedules that do not fit their lives in favor of priority scheduling for parents, but I have found at my institution that when faculty sit down together to address scheduling needs, we all try to accommodate one another. As Jim Larimore notes in his work on mentoring, “people, especially very bright and accomplished people, are more comfortable speaking about each other than they are with each other” (228). Scheduling from a distance allows tensions to build, whereas being in the room together seems to create more willingness to cooperate. It is not a perfect process, and my department is small (seven people), which helps enable our cooperation. If such a meeting is not possible, then chairs and others in charge of making the schedule should consider scheduling requests based on the needs parents of young children. It is also possible (though not always easy), to use Doodle or other scheduling software to try to take into account a small group’s actual availability when it comes to committee meetings and the like. As much as possible, we should try to be considerate of one another’s lived lives away from the academy and try to make meetings work for everyone, even using Zoom or other teleconferencing technology to facilitate them. In fact, if one silver lining has come out of COVID-19 for academia, it is that we have now seen the possibilities concerning how we meet—remote meetings are doable and often quite productive. Other important flexibilities the academy can offer have to do with creating dedicated space and time for breastfeeding mothers, showing understanding when it comes to missed or curtailed meetings and offering a sympathetic ear when needed. All of us in academia have now been forced to understand that sometimes our jobs really can be done from home; perhaps more remote teaching possibilities for academic mothers and parents could be extended even after the risk of the coronavirus is no longer with us. Individual efforts towards sensible scheduling can go a long way, but they should not be where our efforts end.

Feminists should heed the call for more collective action in our personal and professional spaces, as well as in larger society. Senior scholars and administrators have work to do, including advocating for new policies and

fostering a culture that does not discriminate against mothers, especially mothers of young children. I have seen progress locally, but we are not there yet, and much work is left to be done. I spent five of my six years on the tenure track pregnant or lactating. A tolling policy did not exist with my first pregnancy, but it did with my second. That is progress. However, I still work with faculty members who are reluctant to utilize our tolling policy for legitimate reasons, such as seeing it backfire in departmental RTP, where balloters are expecting to see more work for the extra time; we have work to do. As for parental leave, I was able to take six weeks of paid leave for the birth of my first child (paid because although I had not built up enough sick leave, I was in the sick leave pool, another important tool). With my second, I took eight weeks because his was a C-section birth. I needed a doctor's note for the operation and the payment of the additional two weeks. My family was able to plan the births to best utilize summer break, and we did not suffer financially, so this is a start. My husband (a professor at the same university) was only able to take off a couple of days with each child, and he used his sick leave each time. This was the norm, and he did not challenge it. We need to go further.

Even if my husband and I could have each taken the recommended fourteen weeks of paid leave, and even if I had been able to toll with my first child, new parenthood would have still been a family-based and individual struggle for each of us. Beyond policies and culture, we need to recognize that networks, communities, extended family, and friends are necessary to get us through the stresses of parenting, particularly the shock of the early years. (My children are now in middle school and high school—the stresses are still there, but their quality, and my life, is different.) As my children have grown, I have needed to rely on the support of friends and family to help me through the difficulties they present. As a mentoring coordinator, I am constantly thinking about ways to provide the types of support faculty (junior and mid-career, tenure stream and contingent) need on my campus. The model provided by Ellen Daniell about her problem-solving group of women academics in *Every Other Thursday* seems promising, though not everyone can find a group that will voluntarily meet for peer mentoring every two weeks. More informal types of connections can work as well. Thinking about the eagerness with which young parents in the academy reached out to my 2017 MLA panel about parental policies in academe, I am reminded that no matter how far we (hopefully) will continue to move forwards in what we can provide academic parents, new faculty, new parents, and academics not aware of MIRCI and its excellent work still need to find places to have these conversations. Facebook groups like Tenure-Track Moms, websites such as *akidemiclife.com*, and more intentional cohorts of women working in relational mentoring practice to provide safe spaces for discussion and support (Hammer et al.) can all provide needed help until society catches up with parents' needs.

While we are waiting for and working towards fair parental leave policies and quality as well as affordable universal childcare, we should work on the following steps: 1) Individual choices to not bifurcate our lives into parenting and scholarship; 2) RTP decisions recognizing the importance of interdisciplinary and autoethnographical scholarship, along with enforcing policies and transparency around tolling, and fair/reasonable research productivity expectations; 3) tolling policies to account for the time needed for the parenting of young children, with options for being part-time on the tenure track or remote teaching possibilities; 4) local decisions to provide intentional community and friendship to parents as well as dedicated space for breastfeeding mothers and children on campus; and 5) sensible scheduling. Our ultimate goal must be larger systemic changes to parental leave and childcare that will grant the types of policies that will help all parents. In the meantime, we need to use everything we have to help the health and wellbeing of academic mothers who are raising the next generation.

Endnote

1. All survey information, unless otherwise noted, regarding academic mothers and COVID-19 is pulled from data gathered in a survey called “COVID-19 and Parental Policies in Academe,” created and distributed by the author, which received 221 responses. This survey has IRB 20-227 exempt status. It was shared via social media and e-mail for approximately two weeks ending May 15, 2020.

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