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Julie Hanlon Rubio

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Seeking Work-Family Balance: Perils and Possibilities

Special allowances for special needs?

By Julie Hanlon Rubio

A Snapshot

When I started teaching at St. Louis University, my boys were two, three, and five. We had just moved from the west coast. Before I went to work three days a week, I woke up early to exercise, changed diapers, helped the boys get dressed, supervised breakfast, packed lunches, made sure each one had his homework and permission slips, walked one kid to school, drove the others to preschool. I arrived at school with little time to spare before class. I taught, held office hours, ate lunch at my desk, and tried to make it home by either noon or two, when the preschool day ended. On days at home, I took kids to the park, read stories, played games, caught up on housework, and tried to work during nap times.

In my second shift (afternoons and evenings), I walked kids home from school, took them outside to play, helped with homework, made dinner, cleaned up the inevitably dirty floor, did dishes, gave baths, read stories, helped the boys clean their rooms and get into their pjs, and put them to bed. Then the third shift of grading and class preparation would begin and often last until well after midnight. I tackled writing projects during winter, spring, and summer breaks.

Somehow, in the blur that was the early 2000s, I published enough to earn tenure. A few years ago, I had a near sudden realization that the really difficult days were over. I could breathe. I could take a yoga class, meet a student for coffee, read the morning paper, write regularly during the academic year. My kids had reached their teens and they didn't need me as much anymore. I still juggle more in the mornings and evenings than my single colleagues do, but most of my interaction with my kids happens in carpools, at dinner time, or later in the evening when we all combine school work with reading and listening to music.

Was It Worth It?

As I look back, I am grateful to have had a career in academia when my children were young. Although my profession

is demanding, it is also extremely flexible. There are very few hours in a week when I absolutely have to be somewhere. When my kids were little, I was able to put them in half-day preschool, be home with them during winter and summer breaks, be a homeroom parent, attend special presentations during the school day, and stay home with them when they were sick. If something conflicted with class or a faculty meeting, I had to scramble, but my husband was ready to jump in and we developed a network of friends who helped each other out. All in all, I got to spend a lot of time with my kids, much more than most full-time working professionals.

Of course, I paid a certain price for that privilege. I gave up sleep, friends, and personal time. I had very little energy left to hang out with colleagues at work or contribute to campus life. I did what I could, but often, I just had to say no. Each year, as my kids progressed (i.e., went to school for a full day, were able to walk themselves to school, could stay home alone for short periods of time, didn't need me to bathe them or make their lunches, read their own books, etc.), the time I had given up came back to me. I began to contribute more to campus life. I have the next 25 years to keep giving. The sacrifices I made to have both a rich family life and a rich professional life were worth it.

The Responsibilities of Jesuit Universities

Still, some might ask whether universities should avoid hiring parent-academics like myself. After all, if I was able to teach and publish well enough to earn tenure working fewer hours than my non-parent colleagues, presumably I would be able to do a great more if I had no children. Perhaps, my single or childless colleagues offer the university more for their money.

In some cases, those without children do give more. In particular, I notice that priests at my university are exceptionally

Julie Hanlon Rubio is in the theology department at St. Louis University.



A student at Regis University juggles childcare while trying to study.

generous in the time they spend with students. Some single professors are very prolific. However, I also know colleagues with small children who somehow manage to publish more, teach better, or do more administrative work than most of the rest of us.

Yet, it is important to remember that not everyone can pull this off. For instance, women academics are more likely to be married to men with demanding jobs than male academics, while male academics are more likely to have spouses who work part-time or have flexible hours. In addition, women still do a greater share of childcare and housework in dual career marriages, though the gap is closing. Some people have special needs children, two or three children close together, or high-needs kids. Some juggle both childcare and elder care. Many live far away from extended family. Some simply are not going to be able to give as much of their time to work during the intensive years of care.

At a Jesuit university, I hope that's acceptable. If we're about teaching the whole person, then it only makes sense that we should treat faculty and staff as whole persons. Sociologists talk about "spillover" when family issues (illness or school vacations, for instance) intrude on the workday. Traditionally, the "good worker" was someone who refused to allow these issues to get in the way of performance. But that was only possible because someone was at home to take care of things. Today, most families are headed either by single parents or dual-career parents. Spillover is inevitable. Treating the worker as a person means recognizing this reality and working with it. Not to deal with these issues means accepting a gender gap that still persists for full-time faculty and failing to care well to the most overburdened among us.

Best Practices

If we're serious about forming men and women for others, we have to find ways to support workers with family care-giving responsibilities.

What can universities do?

- Have formal, written policies on family leave and extending the tenure clock, and make sure department chairs know about them. A semester of paid leave is optimal.
- Provide assistance with child care and elder care, at least through offering information and flexible spending accounts, if possible through offering care on campus or subsidizing costs.
- Encourage a family-friendly culture in which faculty and staff do not fear taking advantage of benefits or asking for help when they need it.

What can departments do?

- When scheduling courses and meetings, first consider the needs of those with family care-giving responsibilities.
- Protect caregivers' time by minimizing requests for on campus service.
- Fairly evaluate colleagues with respect for their care-giving responsibilities.

What can individuals do?

- If current policies are inadequate, start a conversation in one department or across departments. Join together to advocate for more justice.
- If you are a caregiver, take advantage of benefits offered to you.
- If you are not a caregiver, make yourself available to help out.
- Support others in their choices, whatever they are.

Though treating caregivers justly will require some sacrifice on the part of universities, we all stand to benefit from a more diverse workforce, not to mention a happier one. This sort of accommodation need not diminish the Jesuit mission. After all, when care-giving responsibilities are most intense, faculty and staff are being men and women for others in their homes. Care-giving is a service not just to their own families, but to the whole society. Small adjustments can make it possible for Jesuit universities to do their part in helping workers balance the many different ways in which they give of themselves. ■