

Advice to “Professor Mom”

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Abstract

Few engineering and engineering technology faculty are women, and fewer still have children. Is it a choice: “A Wife or a Life?” (Ms Mentor’s Impeccable Advice for Women in Academia, Emily Tooth, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997). Such a view makes having a family and gaining tenure sound either impossible or easy (if your husband is helpful). Reality lies in between.

In order to recruit and retain women into engineering and engineering technology fields, female faculty must be present as successful role models. It is essential that faculty and administrators understand the issues faced by working mothers to create an environment where success is possible for *all* faculty members.

Two engineering technology faculty members have some practical advice for “Professor Mom.” Set your priorities and live with them. Give your best to your family first. As successful men retire, they often wish they had spent more time with their family and less time at work. As “Professor Mom” (realize mothers are exceptionally prone to guilt), it is even more important for you to be a crucial part of the life of your family. And, “Professor Mom,” give your smartest to your career. Spend your time wisely and document everything so nothing your accomplish gets forgotten. Tie your two roles together. And remember that neither time “in rank” or childhood lasts forever.

I. Introduction

This paper was prompted by a section of the book, Ms. Mentor’s Impeccable Advice for Women in Academia by Emily Tooth¹. Ms. Mentor received an inquiry about balancing family responsibilities with academic career. She titled her reply “A Wife or a Life?” Her basic premise was that it was practically impossible to be an involved mother and wife with a successful tenure career. We believe women faculty can find balance between their many roles, but must be given the freedom to so.

We are 1) a single mom and 2) a working mom with the perfect husband (he cooks, he cleans, he spends his vacation days taking kids to the doctor) and we know many of stay at home moms - we are all harried and stressed. We need to dispel the myth that “if my husband did more, everything would fine . . .” There are never enough hours in the day because we love our children and want to do the best we can for them. There is always something more we either feel we should, or would just like to do for them.

Finding balance is difficult. Universities are making allowances for, and even rewarding, faculty (usually male) who wish to balance entrepreneurial and professorial roles. However, paying serious attention to family obligations is seldom viewed in the same light as working part time for a private company, even though the time commitments might be the same. Ezkowitz et al² found in their research “Thus, at present, the strategy of balancing career and family is contrary to the culture of high-status research universities and is difficult to arrange and sustain. Nevertheless, this is the option that most women in our sample wished to pursue. Few had the support of their institutions or persons available whose example they could follow.”

II. Rationale

There is an expressed desire of society as a whole to have more females in non-traditional fields. However, few engineering technology faculty are women. Universities find it difficult to locate women who meet the TAC-ABET qualifications for technology faculty. Of the 382,700 engineers in industry with master’s degrees, only 10.7% are women. If a doctorate is required, search and screen committees will only find 6.8% of the 80,300 industry engineering PhD.’s are women³. Because this data does not break out years of experience, and because the number of the women in the field has become significant only recently, the actual number of women candidates who meet the requirement of masters with three years of industrial experience is actually lower.

There is a critical link between female students pursuing degrees in the engineering disciplines and the presence of female faculty in their education. If the female faculty are stressed and struggling to balance family and career, female students may lose motivation to continue in the field. Our female students directly question us regarding the practical aspects of balancing personal lives and careers. The truthful response we provide greatly influences our students’ vision of their work and family arrangements. If female students do not have successful role models who demonstrate how to balance engineering technology and family they will look for role models in other fields who can. Certainly this is counterproductive to recruitment efforts.

It is essential that faculty and administrators understand the issues faced by women faculty with families in order to go beyond lip service for the encouragement of women into engineering and engineering technology. “Academic practices, presumed to be meritocratic and gender-free, often work against women’s professional success.”² For example, faculty involvement in a private company consultation is praised and rewarded. It is well understood that consulting work keeps faculty technical skills current and thus enable them to teach students current evolutions in the field. What is seldom acknowledged is that the teamwork and leadership skills, which are also demanded of our students, are honed by family obligations. Mothers must be able to communicate, motivate, schedule, prioritize, build consensus, etc. These essential abilities, which are exactly what industry seeks in a diverse workforce, can also be brought into the classroom.

Industry and academia present different challenges for female employees. While business still has “glass ceiling” issues, many of the daily problems of working mothers have been addressed by making the work place more family friendly: flex-time, on-site day care, telecommuting, etc.

Universities and their unique environments must seek distinctive and creative solutions to be family friendly. Techniques traditionally created to break “glass ceiling” problems do not apply to the skill set desired in successful faculty.

We believe that there are some practices that women faculty can employ to help create balance and successful career development.

III. Basic Advice

First, we must dispel a myth: school age children take as much time as infants! Even though we don't have to change their diapers anymore, there are more demands that cannot be met by child-care providers. This is especially true for intellectual parents who know the importance of doing homework correctly and the benefits of extracurricular activities. While working in industry, pregnant with her first, one author couldn't understand why a mother of two grade school age children should negotiate so hard and long for a part time position. She tried to explain that school brought the complications of homework, field trips, having friends over to play and work on group projects, music lessons, sports, etc. Parents are the only ones willing to spend the hours from 3:00 to 9:00pm every day as driver and chaperone. Many times every child will have to be a different place - necessitating both parents pitching in and there still not be a way to get it all done. Since most universities do not treat part-time faculty as permanent employees, let alone support advancing part-time faculty in rank or tenure, asking for a part time position for women faculty is the same as resigning. Women faculty must find another way to cope for the long term. Methods must work from the birth of a first child until the youngest grows up and leaves home – a span of 18 or more years.

Set your priorities, then, live with them. Give your best to your family. Many successful men say as they retire that they wished they spent more time with their families and less time at work. As mothers (always prone to guilt) it's even more important for us to be a crucial part of our families' lives. This means that there will be many times when your roles will collide. When you cannot be at a meeting because of a tonsillectomy, do not see this as failure. You have made a choice between being in two places at once and reality.

Tie your roles together. Make everything count twice. Develop and coordinate an activity within your field of expertise for your child's classroom - then document it as K-12 outreach in your dossier. Maximize every minute by being able to pick up your faculty role when as Mom you have a moment of peace. Keep work with you in the car to pick up when you are waiting in the doctor's office or in the car pool line, or during soccer practice.

Document everything. Ms. Mentor explains this well in her book. Things that are routine or may seem insignificant can become a key point in your dossier. But it is vital to update your file frequently (weekly?) so nothing is forgotten. When you present an experiment in the fifth grade classroom, write it down right away!

Examine the way your co-workers think. The men we work with do not worry about snow days or school vacations. They can stay late when necessary and drop everything when asked. By examining their perspective, viewing their flexibility, we can see how they react and have found

the following to be constructive. Face the difference between the two worlds of work. Knowing the differences helps you accomplish two things. First, you can brainstorm and, perhaps, be able to piece together a plan that will bring some of *their* flexibility into your household. Secondly, you will be able to see your restrictions and make them clear to others. While this may not seem to be a satisfactory solution, defining the limits of your capabilities in the roles as wife, mother and professor lessens personal expectations of perfection in every category.

Spend your time wisely. Give up on perfection. Learn to say “no” well. Be firm, be reasonable and do not offer explanations that include child-care issues. If your “no” is not accepted, you need to state clearly your limitations and a workable solution. Put these ideas in writing, and keep the person who has requested your time apprised of your progress.

Explore the socialization of men and the differences in your upbringing. Learn about the psychology of men in business. Sherwood describes some of these differences: “Men also take things a lot less personally. They will yell and scream and call each other bloody idiots over a technical point, then go have a beer together. The fact that someone doesn't like a particular idea of yours does not necessarily mean that they don't like or respect you. They just may lack diplomacy. If someone is in your face, it's probably because he or she feels responsible for but not in control of something. This is a deadly combination.”⁴ The information you learn will also be very helpful to your female students.

See your position as unique and an opportunity for standing out, being remembered. You may be asked to represent your school because of your gender – see this as a positive occasion, just don't say yes too often. As one of the few (or only) female faculty members, you will be drafted for many committees that need “a woman's point of view.” Only agree to serve on the committees that 1) are important to your career or 2) you deem personally important. Say “no” to the rest.

Recognize that you may have to prove your abilities many, many times, but respect will come with repetition. Salesmen will not assume you are a faculty member. New students will sit agog when you walk in the first day. However, once you answer their questions correctly or solve their crisis, you will have changed *them*, enlightened them! Be patient!

IV. Conclusion

In order to achieve the goal of diversity in the work force, the established faculty and administration must recognize that females, especially those with families, cannot fit into the mold created by years of traditional expectations. “Earlier in the century, marriage was grounds for a woman's expected retirement from a faculty position. The mutual exclusion of academic and family life has a long history. Until well into the nineteenth century Oxbridge male academics were also expected to choose between academic career and marriage. . . . Even when a choice between academic career and family is no longer an official requirement, the presumption that each role requires a woman's total attention survives. It next surfaces when children are contemplated or arrive.”² Simply endorsing a search for more female faculty will not produce the desired result – more female faculty. A key component of the process is the recognition that female faculty *are different*. We have different issues and offer a different texture to the process

of education. If it is exactly that unique dimension which is the desired contribution, then female faculty must be accepted as whole individuals. This paper offers ways for female faculty to blend into the traditional professor role. It is hoped this paper also increases the awareness of those in the traditional professor role to understand the unique "Professor Mom."

Finally, we have it on good authority that many children reach 18 before their parents retire. I hope my bid for full professor can wait a few more years. And that Nobel Prize will have to wait, too.

Research and grading can wait 'till tomorrow,
For children grow up, we've learned to our sorrow.
So tenure clock stop,
Committee work, go to sleep.
I'm nurturing my family,
And children don't keep.

(Adapted from Anonymous.)

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