

The Myth of Work-Family Balance? A Response from the Section for Students

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In the Psynopsis issue of Fall 2006, Dr. Elizabeth Church wrote a piece entitled 'The Myth of Work-Family Balance?' In this thought-provoking article, Dr. Church outlined the difficulties in balancing one's career and family, and the concerns that graduate students have regarding this balance.

Certainly, for many students, a struggle ensues when they consider how, and if, they can have both a successful family life and a successful career. This struggle can cause stress, and may cause students to doubt their ability to have 'it all' (i.e., a career and family). Questions may arise such as 'is it possible to have both a successful career and family?', 'when is the best time to have children?', and 'will I be able to fulfill my duties as both a parent and a professional?'

However, students may be reluctant to voice such questions or concerns in the graduate school setting. As Dr. Church noted, students do not want to appear uncommitted to their careers by raising such issues. This highlights the challenge that some students face – the challenge of feeling torn between work and family, and perhaps feeling it necessary to sacrifice one domain (e.g., family) for the sake of the other (e.g., career). Students may also feel that they lack appropriate role models who are both successful professionals and parents. Although graduate school can be a time of great professional and personal rewards, it may also be a time of added stress and

anxiety for those who are contemplating both career and family decisions.

In response to work-family balance concerns, Dr. Church recommended that 'familyfriendly' graduate programs be developed, and that universities establish policies regarding child rearing. As students, we would welcome such developments! Although it may be daunting to develop new policies, or change existing environments, here are some student and family-friendly suggestions that departments may consider:

Find a mentor: Encourage students to seek a mentor who has both a professional career and a family. Perhaps establish a faculty member in the department who is willing to serve as a mentor to students on this subject – someone who is open to having students approach him or her about work-family balance issues, and someone who can guide students with regards to such issues. Make it known to students that this person is available.

Conduct a departmental workshop: On work-family balance! As students, we are granted several opportunities to attend great workshops. Many of these workshops, however, focus on professional aspects of our lives (e.g., how to write a successful grant). While these workshops are very important to our professional development, we are not typically exposed to workshops that provide hands-on, practical advice for

other areas of our lives – like, for example, balancing one’s career and family life.

Promote family-oriented activities: Many departments hold social activities throughout the year (e.g., welcome events; holiday parties). Conduct some of these activities with families in mind – hold a family bbq or organize a softball game in which family members can participate. This is a way to combine professional and family life and provides students/faculty with the chance to interact with other people who have families and who may be facing similar challenges.

Encourage supervisors to discuss work-family balance with students: The supervisor-student relationship is of utmost importance during the graduate school years. Supervisors guide students, and help them with important decisions regarding their career. Encourage supervisors to also speak to students about balance issues (e.g., when to have children; the advantages of having children during vs. after graduate school). While supervisors should not be expected to counsel their students through personal decisions, they may have important advice to share with regards to balancing one’s professional and personal life. Moreover, by speaking about these issues, supervisors

relay the message that it is okay to consider family in one’s decisions, and provide a more open and supportive environment.

Establish departmental guidelines: Establish clear guidelines on family-related issues that students may face. For instance, establish guidelines on what students can expect from the department if they have children during graduate school or take maternity/paternity leave. For example, can students expect to get funding while on leave? Are students expected to maintain the same timeline in their studies as peers without children? Having guidelines that answer such questions may help students plan and make decisions regarding their personal and professional lives.

These are just some suggestions that, from a student perspective, may help ease the struggle of trying to balance graduate school and personal life decisions. It is exciting to see this issue addressed in *Psynopsis*; Dr. Church should be applauded for giving a voice to the many students and professionals who are challenged in their efforts to achieve work-family balance. In doing so, she has validated the concerns of many, and has drawn attention to an important issue facing students.