

Science & Tech

Life on Both Sides of the Microscope

Conference to look at work-family balance in academia

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By Chris Berdik

More and more Americans are, as the saying goes, living to work. And families are feeling the squeeze. Compared to their colleagues in other industrialized nations, Americans spend about two more weeks a year at work, according to the [International Labor Organization](#). Meanwhile, U.S. workers are guaranteed much less in terms of paid sick leave, subsidized child care, and paid parental leave.

At American universities, where a growing number of women are in science and engineering fields, the challenge of maintaining a balance between work and family life is particularly acute, according to Bonnie Teitleman, director of the [Boston University Faculty and Staff Assistance Office](#) (FSAO), a free counseling service for University staff and faculty and their families.

“Women feel that they have ‘missed the wave’ in their career when they have chosen to prioritize family,” says Teitleman, noting frequent concerns that female faculty raise with FSAO. In addition, she says, women in the sciences often have predominantly male colleagues, and consequently, “don’t feel as able to express their need to prioritize family.”

All of these issues will be discussed tomorrow, November 8, at a daylong conference on The Research Life: Work/Family Issues for Scientists and Engineers, sponsored by [Boston University Women in Science and Engineering](#) and being held at the George Sherman Union.

The final hour of the conference will be brainstorming sessions on personal, familial, and institutional responses to work-family stress. For a preview, *BU Today* recently spoke with FSAO associate director Thierry Guedj (GRS’01), a Metropolitan College adjunct assistant professor of psychology, who will lead one of the sessions.

BU Today: Is America out of balance when it comes to the demands of work and family?

Guedj: America, when compared to Canada and Europe, does very little to help working families meet the demands of work and family. For example, while the majority of European governments provide substantial subsidies to citizens — not just the poor — for high-quality day care and preschool, the United States provides very little subsidized child care. And the child care that it does sponsor has been shown to be of marginal quality.

To make matters worse, the typical American workweek is significantly longer than its European counterpart, by as much as 10 hours, according to some empirical studies.

That increases people's stress levels and contributes to many of the most commonly diagnosed disorders, including depression, insomnia, cardiovascular disease, and anxiety disorders. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there has been a 400 percent increase in workers' compensation claims in the last decade, mainly as a result of increased stress.

The mainstreaming of the cell phone, the BlackBerry, and e-mail has also contributed to the growing imbalance between work and home. These devices make employees, managers, and executives ever more reachable by peers, customers, and supervisors. Actual downtime is rapidly shrinking, and people now have working vacations.

What is the “psychology of work” in an academic setting? Is it different from the corporate world?

Universities tend to be more generous with vacation time, sick time, and holidays. But working in a university system can be just as intense as working in the corporate world.

Furthermore, while many of the challenges are similar to those in other types of organizations, the academic world poses a number of unique challenges. Because the driving forces of academic life are learning and research, many faculty come to our office seeking guidance on prioritizing their professional activities. They wonder how they can maximize their writing and research activities while at the same time being good mentors and role models to students.

How often does the FSAO hear from faculty and staff who are having trouble balancing work and family?

It's a fairly common concern, especially among those employees who have infants and young children. A huge part of the problem is the exorbitant cost of quality child care. Many employees, even those with fairly high salaries, often go into debt

in order to pay for the typical median cost of child care in the Boston area — \$1,250 a month per child. Families with more than one young child sometimes have to file for bankruptcy as a result of the costs involved in raising a family. The high cost of housing in this area does not help either.

Do you hear more from people in science and engineering fields when it comes to work-life balance?

Absolutely. Awards and grants are the lifeblood of scientific inquiry. The failure to get research funds can be the death knell of a scientific career. The pressure under which scientists find themselves can be overwhelming. No publication will come out unless the researcher is able to fund his or her research program. If you don't have grants, it's hard to gather data. And without data you can't publish. So people can get stuck in a vicious cycle.

Very few literature or philosophy professors need a large grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in order to pursue their career goals. As long as they keep writing and publishing in reputable peer-reviewed journals and do a decent job teaching, they will most likely succeed professionally. In contrast, medical researchers without National Institutes of Health or equivalent funding are at significant risk of having their career ended prematurely.

Are there gender differences in terms of who raises these issues of work and family?

It used to be that this was a more of a women's issue. But it's very different now. The number of women holding academic and administrative positions in academia has been rising steadily for many years. As a result, women are able to use their growing numbers and power to leverage the political will that's needed to create policies that are more family-friendly. Because men have been increasingly more involved in the lives of their children, they, too, have overwhelmingly rallied to the cause and are very much pushing the same family agenda.

What are some strategies for coping with the competing demands of academic and family life?

Most important, young academics must find mentors and collaborators who can give them wise advice on how to be productive early in their career. Faculty who find it impossible to manage the demands of academic and family life may be going about it the wrong way. They may spend 75 percent of their time preparing lectures and advising students. This means that academic publishing and grant-writing will need to take place during the time that could have been reserved for family. Young faculty need to pay a lot of attention to how they allocate their time. They need to seek guidance from successful people who are a few years their senior.

Also, people do come to us and ask about negotiating flexible work schedules with

their bosses. We will coach people on how to talk to their supervisor about it and help them make a proposal that will be in the best interest of both the employees and their department.

Are there institutional changes needed or larger, cultural changes that would help?

It has been established through dozens of research studies that robust peer mentoring programs among faculty make an enormous difference in the productivity of young scholars. The schools that have put such programs in place do much better than average at promoting and retaining the talent that they hired at significant cost. Full-fledged quality mentorship programs provide the necessary structure for academic success.

Universities could gain a great deal by providing more opportunities for affordable on-site quality child care and should make it a top priority. It's good for the employees and the bottom line, because providing these services promotes institutional loyalty by increasing staff retention. It also helps reduce stress and absenteeism. Down the line, it may even help create the next generation of budding scholars that all institutions need for their long-term sustenance.

To speak with an FSAO counselor, call 617-353-5381 or send a confidential e-mail to fsao@bu.edu.

The Research Life: Work/Family Issues for Scientists and Engineers, which is on Thursday, November 8, from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. in the George Sherman Union, is free and open to the public. Registration is encouraged at wisersvp@bu.edu.

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