

2017

My Double Life in Academia, or Extreme Parenting on the Tenure Track

Mariana F. Past
Dickinson College

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.dickinson.edu/faculty_publications

 Part of the [Work, Economy and Organizations Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Past, Mariana F., "My Double Life in Academia, or Extreme Parenting on the Tenure Track" (2017). *Dickinson College Faculty Publications*. Paper 588.
http://scholar.dickinson.edu/faculty_publications/588

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Dickinson Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact scholar@dickinson.edu.

My double life in academia, or extreme parenting on the tenure track

Mariana Past

Landing a tenure-track job offer is generally regarded as a real achievement. That outcome, at least, is the hope of many doctoral students in the humanities who complete up to ten years of study. But beginning that highly-anticipated position—and navigating the complexities of institutional requirements, campus cultures, departmental dynamics, student needs, and publishing protocols—while simultaneously advising students, developing new courses, maintaining a level of visibility on campus, and staying current in one’s field of expertise—involves a steep learning curve that new PhDs, and women in particular, are unevenly prepared to travel. For any individual scholar, the stakes of negotiating the tenure ladder are sufficiently high. When other bodies enter into the equation, though—whether partners or children, academics or professionals of separate backgrounds—the radar screen becomes even more crowded, options overlap (or do not), and choices collide. This is news to none; the statistics are sobering for female academics in the United States and beyond, regarding the impact of parenting upon the probability of achieving tenure and promotion. That marriage itself has disproportionately negative effects upon the work lives of women professors, however, is maddening (representative studies will be subsequently discussed). Sharing some of the “bad” (and good) news about academia is the goal of this essay, which focuses on the early tenure-track years (my recent professional life-stage).

My objective in conceptualizing this chapter on “extreme parenting” in academia is not to complain, but to explore some of the tensions, ambiguities, and questions that can surround the work of female scholars in the early stages of their careers. Drawing from my experiences as a

junior faculty member, partner, and mother, I articulate how pervasive these unfortunately quite “normal” challenges seem to be, despite efforts on the part of some institutions to develop more flexible and/or family-friendly policies. I also examine how implicit tendencies towards institutional hierarchization reflect gendered patterns, further shaping women’s experiences as scholars. Each step of the tenure track, I argue, can productively be viewed as an ongoing performance, rather than a measure of one’s intellectual or personal worth. Adopting appropriate strategies can facilitate this professional endeavor; conversely, harboring doubts or experiencing downturns in no way signifies failure. This goes against the well-intentioned but ultimately damaging conventional feminist notion that women professionals can or should ideally strive to “have it all,” suggesting that balancing life and work can or should happen harmoniously. My comments coincide with Anne-Marie Slaughter’s critique, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” underlining the enduring structural challenges to the progress of female professionals. I agree that solutions certainly must transcend individual determination, but with the tenure clock ticking, female academics cannot wait for structural change to happen—they need immediate ideas, strategies and support at a crucial moment when many are, as one of my senior colleagues puts it, “doing everything at once.” Accordingly, the conclusion of this essay discusses approaches that have helped me negotiate junior faculty responsibilities while commuting and parenting.

My doctoral studies in Spanish and Francophone Caribbean literature were completed within a competitive graduate program in North Carolina that offered opportunities for research, travel and scholarship. Throughout the program, divisions between professional and personal life seemed clear-cut: no graduate students, and almost none of the faculty in my department, had families; in the rare cases that they did, children were rarely seen on campus. I became pregnant

with my first child near the end of my (eight-year) graduate career, and my (female) department chair told me that I had been wise to conceal my condition under winter wraps (for seven months), considering my outstanding fellowship applications. My husband and infant son accompanied me to the MLA Convention that December, an entirely different gauntlet to run; those interviews netted one campus visit but nothing worth uprooting the family for (my husband was gainfully employed in secondary education). The next spring, prior to my dissertation defense, I was offered a tenure-track, specialist position at a liberal arts college in Pennsylvania. Transitioning to this new professional stage involved a process of cultural and personal adaptation whose intensity I had not anticipated. Central challenges involved geography and, to a lesser but more lasting degree, entrenched conceptions of institutional status.

Geography was the most immediate hurdle; I had one week to consider the job offer. Since my husband had just renewed his contract, we decided that I would commute to Pennsylvania for a year, and he would carry out a job search the following spring. After I was granted a four-day teaching schedule, we took this leap of faith. I rented an apartment and began commuting weekly in August—mostly by plane, but sometimes by car, a seven-hour drive. This experience proved to be more common than I had imagined, and not in just academic contexts. A University of Pennsylvania *Gazetteer* article discusses “The Commuting Couple: Oxymoron or Career Freedom?” This study addresses the challenges and rewards of commuting arrangements (for both genders), based upon a composite description: “They live more than 500 miles apart, and they travel three to five hours by plane once every four to six weeks. Their average age is 45, and they have been married or involved in a serious relationship for 14 years. Two out of three are in managerial or professional positions; the others toil in the Academy. Some 18 percent have children” (Slania). The survey identified significant disparities between the experiences of

women and men: “Men, for example, found greater acceptance from society when they traveled to another location to work than did women, who often felt that they were deemed poor wives or mothers for failing to keep together the traditional family unit. But some men also acknowledged that their pride was wounded or that they were considered ‘weak’ for allowing their wives to pursue career over family” (Slania).

A more recent Stanford gender research study specifically concerning those who “toil in the Academy,” *Dual-Career Academic Couples: What Universities Need to Know*, reveals that “72 percent of full-time faculty are in dual-career partnerships (where partners are either academics or employed elsewhere in the workforce)” (Schiebinger et al. 34). Among members of the U.S. professoriate, the report notes, 36 percent are academic couples where both partners are professors. This pioneering report articulates many of the highly-charged questions faced not only by people in academic partnerships, but also by other professional couples: “When push comes to shove and couples must decide to apply for particular jobs, what gives? Whose career comes first? Who follows whom?” (35).

Such issues surrounding the juggling of job priorities for academic and professional couples are now openly debated. Curt Rice’s blog, “Why women leave academia and why universities should be worried,” speaks to the multi-layered obstacles confronting both male and female PhD candidates:

They come to realise that a string of post-docs is part of a career path, and they see that this can require frequent moves and a lack of security about future employment. Women are more negatively affected than men by the competitiveness in this stage of an academic career and their concerns about competitiveness are fuelled, they say, by a relative lack of self-confidence [...] Women more than men see great sacrifice as a

prerequisite for success in academia. This comes in part from their perception of women who have succeeded, from the nature of the available role models. Successful female professors are perceived by female PhD candidates as displaying masculine characteristics, such as aggression and competitiveness, and they were often childless. (Rice)

Married males tend to be promoted more quickly than their single colleagues, as Alexis Coe observes in “Being Married Helps Professors Get Ahead, but Only If They’re Male.” Why does the opposite hold true for female faculty? Few women professors have stay-at-home spouses, whereas many male faculty members have helpful spouses at home, allowing them to “fully commit themselves to their professions” (Coe). Women are twice as likely to “take leave to support their partner’s career” or abandon their own professional ambitions—but it seems rather harsh that one of Coe’s male interview subjects calls this “backsliding.” Another problem is that women academics are frequently less adept at saying “no,” and take on too much academic service/committee work out of feelings of obligation to the community. Janni Aragon, speaking to the experience of female professors in Canadian institutions, contends that women academics pay a “marriage penalty”:

For university women who are part of an academic couple, they are likely to be the “trailing spouse.” [...] They relocate for “his” job, “his” career becomes the primary or more important one, especially if it is the higher paid one [...] Women in academe try to figure out how they will balance the need to publish or perish and negotiate having a family and many don’t balance the two. One simply wins. (Aragon)

When well-qualified women leave academia, the decrease in the pool of available talent limits both research and the production of new knowledge—an outcome that institutions of higher learning have every interest in avoiding.

In my case, my husband fully supported the desire for balance between our careers; we both hoped to avoid “trailing spouse” status. With job opportunities extremely limited, we approached the seven-hour commute as best we could, swearing this arrangement would last only one year (it became nearly two). For me, returning to North Carolina each week required time to readjust to family routines and recall effective toddler guidance. I compartmentalized completely, keeping no photos in my office; however, thanks to visits from my mother and a friend, my son spent two weeks with me one semester, and a fun snowy week during the next. Initially our separation was extremely rough, but became easier once my son learned where I went, and that I always came back. When something got misplaced in the house, he speculated, “Maybe it’s in Pennsylvania.” I often overdid it on the job, grading late into the night to avoid taking too much work home; sleep suffered. I didn’t know my colleagues as well as I’d have liked to, because people mostly socialized on weekends, when I was never around.

In the larger picture, ours was a garden-variety, and temporary, separation, especially compared with the experience of immigrants, military families, and families with complex custody arrangements. For me, as a feminist, this was where the rubber hit the road: seizing this professional opportunity required me to put my money where my mouth was. My husband, though often exhausted, became a wonderful primary caregiver; he and our son quickly bonded. Nevertheless, I was overcome with guilt and self-doubt: was I pushing all of us this hard to justify eight years of graduate school? If Eric did not find a job in Central PA, was it fair to ask him to be the primary caregiver for another semester, or another year? Should I abandon

academia and pursue another kind of work? Then again, why did I feel guilty? Why did people react as though it were tragic that I was commuting, fewer than 30 weeks out of the year, when many fathers travel professionally more often? (One of our neighbors in N.C. commuted weekly to Wall Street for years, which wasn't questioned.) I often wondered whether "toiling in the Academy" was worth it, for either sex.

I found perverse pleasure in realizing that the bottom rung of the tenure ladder is challenging for all, and few professors publish many articles their first year. My publication record remained stagnant for the first two years on the job. I simply could not teach, commute, go to conferences, remain on the job market, and parent with sufficient energy left for research; productivity meant reading books on how to cope in academia by Wendy Belcher, Robert Boice, and Emily Toth in brief bursts. Mark Sample, an associate professor who has commuted out of state for over seven years, echoes such sentiments on the "Antenna" blog:

It's a grueling, brain-frying, wallet-emptying, time-wasting, body-breaking, soul-draining way to live. It's incredibly hard on myself, schizophrenically split between two commitments—work and family—that I both take seriously. It's incredibly hard on my wife, who for three days a week is essentially a single working mother. And it's incredibly hard on my children, who, I am relieved to say, don't seem to hold it against me. (Sample)

For parents of either gender faced with traveling pressures, the resilience of young children can be an invaluable resource. Speaking matter-of-factly about commuting—instead of apologetically—is key.

A second pregnancy imposed traveling constraints in my case (at 35 weeks). Going on maternity leave slightly early made a huge difference; I gratefully worked on departmental

projects at home. Subsequently I took an unpaid year of family leave, during which my husband and I continued rolling the dice. The institutional flexibility—or generous gamble, on the part of administrators—that I enjoyed arguably illustrates an emerging trend. As the Stanford study shows, institutions of higher learning in isolated geographical areas tend to have better-defined policies for spousal hiring assistance:

[At Stanford,] six of our 13 schools offer programs for non-academic employed partners. [...] Both Cornell University and Pennsylvania State University have well-developed programs [for non-academic employed partners]. This may not be surprising given that both schools are located in areas with few employment opportunities outside the university. In more recent years, however, schools in less isolated areas are following suit. Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley, among others, are currently establishing such programs. Programs like these may prove to be critically important to recruiting faculty with employed partners. Universities need to collect data and evaluate their programs to (1) assist universities in strategic planning and (2) ensure equitable treatment of all faculty partners—both academic and non-academic. (46-7)

The development of such programs suggests that a climate shift may be occurring, if slowly. Since the mid-1980's it has become more widely understood that professional hires do not involve free-standing individuals (mainly male heads of households, with mobile family units), but whole people with often complex lives. On-campus “wellness” services developed to assist students beyond the classroom—more holistically—are increasingly available to professors too.

Could the emerging fields of eco-criticism and post-humanism—situating humans not in the center, but within a larger, inter-relational web of life forms—possibly have helped with this process? No concrete answer is possible, but the bottom line is that everyone benefits when the

professional and personal lives of faculty are better balanced. As the Stanford report contends, in commuting situations it is not just the individual who suffers, but also the institutions and organizations for whom we work:

Couples who do not find positions at the same or neighboring institution(s) often commute (or one may drop out of academia altogether). When professors face long commutes, universities tend to lose in terms of faculty research, contact hours with students, committee work, and, most importantly, in terms of the kind of serendipitous intellectual exchange that happens when people run into each other informally. Faculty tend to lose in terms of time spent with family and with scholarly colleagues.

(Schiebinger, et al. 68)

Rearranging meeting and/or teaching schedules can mitigate a small part of this problem; understandably, for junior faculty, it may require courage to request such special consideration. Coe's previously-cited essay observes, "Scheduling search meetings for noon instead of 4:30 pm, [makes] a significant difference for working parents, which includes both sexes." Scott Jaschik's "Quiet Desperation' of Academic Women," discussing a University of Irvine study, observes that "a call for much more flexibility" can help improve the situation of women at research universities, and, arguably, elsewhere: "Career paths are needed [...] that do not presume that the quality of work is based on hours in the lab or office, or time to tenure, or time finishing various projects. [Universities are encouraged] to assign tasks in a more gender-neutral way, so that service activities aren't presumed female, and to credit work performed equally -- even if women are more likely than men to do that work" (Jaschik). Put very simply, Mary Matalin (quoted by Slaughter) affirms that for women professionals, "having control over your schedule is the only way that women who want to have a career and a family can make it work" (Slaughter).

In my case, the out-of-state commute only lasted three and a half semesters. But had my husband not ultimately received a job offer in Central PA, I could not realistically have remained on the tenure track, short of divorcing. I would have had to resign from a position I enjoyed and possibly reinvent myself completely. Daunting as this would have been, I knew that I would eventually adjust; I considered a variety of alternative career paths: teaching on the secondary level (which I had done previously), legal translating, or opening a thrift store. Being able to continue my professional trajectory in the same state where my husband worked seemed like a luxury. Returning from family leave, I started year three on the tenure track, working doggedly to submit several journal articles; this provided me crucial momentum. I still commute to work, but the hour-long drive is a manageable inconvenience that provides a not unwelcome buffer between work pressures and family life. Having a limited social life on campus is a reality I have come to accept (and seek to transcend, whenever possible).

After nearly a decade in graduate school, I found the liberal arts college context refreshing: teaching is valued, serious support is given for research, and the presence of family is not taboo; moreover, the position of the humanities is central. Looking back at my six years of assistant professorship, I want to share several things that I wish I had known at the outset, which may help others better negotiate their own professional challenges. In graduate school, thanks to job-related workshops organized by my department, I had been disabused of the idea that professors had many options with respect to where they worked or lived. What went unsaid was that scholars frequently have to make painful choices, requiring partnerships and families to be divided. I did not realize that moving to a new institution can be more difficult or problematic than obtaining an initial offer. Finally, I wish I had known that liberal-arts college faculty—without even mentioning adjunct professors or independent scholars—must work somewhat

harder to be taken seriously by colleagues at research universities. The university/liberal-arts college distinction was something I previously assumed that I grasped well enough, given my experience with the “Preparing Future Faculty” program in graduate school, which included visits to a range of institutions of higher learning in the area, to educate students about the varying professional contexts that we might one day enter. However, within my home department, as PhD candidates prepared for the job market, we were implicitly trained to think “top ten or bust.” Reactions to my liberal-arts college job offer were positive but decidedly mixed: “Great first job!” “That’s good, but don’t worry—you can publish your way out of there.”

De-toxing from these assumptions and expectations took time, as did coming to grips with the fact that institutions themselves represent gendered spaces. These days, at professional gatherings, colleagues from equally competitive research university backgrounds sometimes comment, “You have the best of both worlds!” My institution affords me research and travel support, the ability to regularly teach specialized courses, realistic expectations for tenure, relatively competitive salaries, and a professional climate that accommodates family and personal life. On the other hand, at larger conferences, some people react differently after reading “college” on a name tag, instead of “university.” What has helped me negotiate this professional status change (and some annoying attitudes) is publishing articles, developing a broad network of peers, and acknowledging that academic superstar status may not be what I want to set my sights on (this idea never surfaced in graduate school discussions). I still occasionally hear things like “Are you happy there?” and “Do you want to stay there?” from colleagues at Research One institutions who have difficulty imagining life outside such institutions.

To be sure, it can be tricky to carve out writing time and space when faced with teaching and advising demands, but it is possible. I halfway wish that a book contract were a job requirement, because I would have found a way to finish dissertation revisions and generate a proposal earlier. But had I cranked out the book, something would have suffered—likely my teaching, and almost definitely my family life. As it is, my first book will appear post-tenure, and the manuscript will (hopefully) benefit from the luxury of an extended time frame; I will also have completed the project by choice, not out of necessity. My work still feels gendered in certain ways that are not school-specific. Students occasionally expect women professors to be “motherly” rather than rigorous, and the presence of several strong male personalities in my department renders it imperative for females to be peacemakers. Lastly, when I attend professional conferences, my husband is often asked, “Are you okay with the kids?” When he travels, no one poses that question to me.

Several strategies proved helpful to me during the early stages of tenure-track work, which might be useful to other women in academia—whether mothers, partners, or not. Most fundamentally, finding allies, and good mentors, early on is invaluable (if not novel advice). The value of keeping one’s cards close with everyone else, and confiding only in certain allies, is something that new female professionals may not fully realize or want to embrace. But as in any profession, not everyone in academia is “nice” or inclined to engage much on a personal level. Accordingly, we must learn to adjust and to carefully perform our professionalism. In my case, when I commuted to work from four states away, it was helpful to maintain a professional “poker face” or mask that felt genuine enough, yet helped buy much-needed time and space. Ironically, assuring an inquisitive senior colleague that things were going fine had a calming effect on me too; it became natural to compartmentalize and shift quickly between contexts.

Maintaining personal and professional boundaries can actually be liberating, however much one may enjoy sharing photos with colleagues. Some people simply aren't going to care about, much less understand, the challenges of being a young professional and a parent; you still have to work with them, and sometimes around them. Simply put, it is important to be strategic and to not go looking for what's not there.

Another productive mindset for the tenure track endeavor is remembering that the academic trajectory is a choice—not a *raison d'être*—and alternatives exist. Over the years, imagining other professional scenarios has helped me keep my head around things—and now, when I submit journal articles or grant applications, I always generate formal, written plan “Bs” and sometimes “Cs” to identify other options and help get over potential disappointment down the road. Having a concrete plan for re-applying or transforming the project at a later date definitely helps. So does the knowledge that nobody can read everything related to the field, that research need not (and often cannot) be exhaustive, etc.

Because I have learned more about publishing protocols and institutional politics, strengthened collegial networks, and come to see academia as a sort of game to be played, there is finally some light at the end of the junior-faculty tunnel. Approaching the tenure hurdle, I also feel more committed to helping other women and colleagues who are new parents to realize that they can be successful—and I strongly encourage others to do the same. I acknowledge that my own background was privileged in that my parents were educators with graduate degrees, and they raised me and my sister bilingual (Spanish-English). Also, I taught middle and high school Spanish for four years before beginning doctoral studies, which facilitated my graduate instructorship. However, as a slightly older student, I could not postpone having a family indefinitely. I'm definitely relieved that my stint of “extreme parenting” is over, but I recognize

that having children and commuting during the early stages of tenure-track work forced me to become more efficient. Not being able to over-think professional issues can be a blessing in disguise. Lastly: for anyone beginning a new professional position, whether in the academy or beyond, it is empowering to realize that fear and uncertainty are completely normal, and that when managed well, they can help one be productive. And leading a "double life" is not a bad thing, but ultimately about balance, at whatever stage.

Works Cited

- Aragon, Janni. "Female professors pay a marriage penalty." Special to *The Globe and Mail* Campus Life section. The Globe and Mail, 1 Feb. 2013. Web. 2 Feb. 2013.
<<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/education/female-professors-pay-a-marriage-penalty/article8103705/>>.
- Belcher, Wendy Laura. *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2009. Print.
- Boice, Robert. *Advice for New Faculty Members*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2000. Print.
- Coe, Alexis. "Being Married Helps Professors Get Ahead, but Only If They're Male." *Theatlantic.com*. The Atlantic, 17 Jan. 2013. Web. 1 Feb. 2013.
<<http://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/01/being-married-helps-professors-get-ahead-but-only-if-theyre-male/267289/>>.
- Jaschik, Scott. "'Quiet Desperation' of Academic Women." *Inside Higher Ed.com*. Inside Higher Ed, 12 Jun. 2008. Web. 22 May 2012.
<<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/06/12/women#ixzz1wSTDIIJ3l>>.
- Rice, Curt. "Why women leave academia and why universities should be worried." *Guardian Higher Education Network*. The Guardian, 24 May 2012. Web. 12 Jun. 2013.
<<http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2012/may/24/why-women-leave-academia>>.
- Sample, Mark. "Dual Academic Couples and Long Distance Living." Antenna.com. University of Wisconsin-Madison, Media and Cultural Studies area of the Department of Communication Arts, 25 Oct. 2011. Web. 22 May 2012.

<<http://blog.commart.wisc.edu/2011/10/25/dual-academic-couples-and-long-distance-living/>>.

Schiebinger, Londa, Andrea Davies Henderson, and Shannon K. Gilmartin. *Dual-Career Academic Couples: What Universities Need to Know*. Stanford University: Michelle R. Clayman Institute for Gender Research, 2008. Web. 22 May 2012.

<<http://gender.stanford.edu/dual-career-academic-couples-what-universities-need-know>>.

Slania, John. "Alone Together." *Gazetteer*. University of Pennsylvania, Sept./Oct. 1998. Web. 22 Dec. 2012. <<http://www.upenn.edu/gazette/0998/0998gaz7.html>>.

Slaughter, Anne-Marie. "Why Women Still Can't Have It All." *The Atlantic.com*. The Atlantic, Jul./Aug. 2012. Web. 1 Feb. 2013.

<<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>>.

Toth, Emily. *Ms. Mentor's New and Ever More Impeccable Advice for Women and Men in Academia*. Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 2008. Print