Q&A with authors of new book on balancing home and work life as an academic scientist

Submitted by Colleen Flaherty on December 2, 2016 - 3:00am

Much of the literature on balancing faculty and home life centers on women. There’s talk of the “baby penalty” for women who choose to have children, for example.

A new book, based on five years of research involving academic scientists, sheds more light on the struggles of both men and women as they try to grow their careers and their families. *Failing Families, Failing Science: Work-Family Conflict in Academic Science* (New York University Press) is based on the idea that work-life balance is not an issue exclusive to women -- and must be addressed with gender-neutral solutions. Failure to meet that challenge will result in a dangerous talent drain away from academic science, warn authors Elaine Howard Ecklund, the Herbert S. Autrey Chair in Social Sciences at Rice University, and Anne E. Lincoln, associate professor of sociology at Southern Methodist University.

Ecklund and Lincoln participated in a written discussion about the book.

Q: The book draws on 2,000 surveys of junior and senior scientists and in-depth interviews. Can you share a bit more about your methodology? What did you want to know, about whom?

Ecklund: We surveyed biologists and physicists at 20 top American universities in late 2008 and early 2009 and then followed up over the next few years with 150 in-depth interviews with a random sample of those who responded to the survey. We spent three years collecting data and two years analyzing data on the lives of junior and senior scientists at top U.S. research universities; through a survey of 2,503 scientists and in-depth interviews, they captured both the breadth that comes from surveying a large number of scientists and the depth that comes from face-to-face discussions.

This is a book about how women and men who are scientists at the top U.S. research universities negotiate family life and how the strategies they use will change science. The inability to balance life as a scientist with life as a parent is more than a personal issue or a women’s issue. It is a structural failure resulting from the expectation that the “ideal” scientist will prioritize complete and utter devotion to career above all else.

Q: What are your major findings? How did they differ by gender?

Lincoln: When this research began, we planned to tell the story of how scientists perceive women’s achievements in science and impediments to achievement for women in science. As research often does, ours uncovered something we were not expecting. While women
definitely discussed discrimination in science, we were surprised to find that both women and men mostly talked with us about work-family dynamics in science.

We find that indeed women are hit harder by the pressures of elite academic science, and there is definitely “a motherhood penalty” (we devote a chapter of our book to discussing it). But the institution of science -- and academic science, in particular -- is bad for those who want to have children or pursuits outside of their careers, bad for both men and women.

Perhaps most importantly and most consequential for universities, our five years of research reveals that early-career academic scientists struggle with balancing their work and family lives. This struggle is stopping many young scientists from pursuing positions at top research universities -- or further pursuing academic science at all -- a circumstance that comes at great cost to our national science infrastructure.

**Q: Can you talk a little bit more about the challenges early-career scientists face?**

**Ecklund:** Reaching the level of tenured faculty, the pinnacle of achievement in academia, is a more momentous task than it has ever been. Four years of undergraduate studies are followed by four to six or more years of Ph.D. work. By the time a scientist earns her doctorate, she is likely to be in her late 20s, the time in the life course when most Americans are beginning to settle down. Scientists still must undertake at least one, and increasingly multiple, postdoctoral appointments, which usually range from two to six years, and because many postdoctoral positions are dependent on grant funding, they do not offer the competitive pay, benefits or stability of private-sector jobs.

Next comes an appointment as an assistant professor, lasting five to seven years, and finally -- if successful! -- a tenured associate professor appointment. At this point, most scientists are in their late 30s or early 40s, well past the time most Americans have started raising children. The time as a tenure-track professor is perhaps the most intense and stressful in an academic life, with no specific timeline for moving from associate to full professor. In this highly competitive and lengthy process, when is the right time to start a family? Scientists in academia often feel they have to wait until they are tenured, a perception that has led to a trend of later childbearing among scientists.

**Q: How does the book add to the existing literature on work-life balance in the sciences?**

**Lincoln:** Nearly all of the literature on work-life balance in the sciences focuses on women’s experiences. That work is needed, but our work takes the tension between family life and the calling of scientific work out of its current framing as just a “woman’s problem” to talk about the experiences of both men and women. The tension of scientists balancing work and family is really a structural problem for universities and national science bodies, like the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation.

**Q: What are the particular challenges that academic scientists face, as opposed to other scientists and/or faculty members in other disciplines?**

**Ecklund:** Among all academic disciplines and all professions, scientific disciplines increasingly require longer training and more travel, core structural factors that impinge on family life. Furthermore, researchers find that, when compared with middle- and working-class occupations, the professions, such as medicine, law and banking, have been slower to accommodate workers with families -- and universities are particularly poor at accommodating family life. They’re often far behind the corporate world in providing family-friendly workplaces.
Today, academic scientists must keep multiple complex tasks going simultaneously, which might in any one day include lab management, teaching and applying for funding. At the same time, universities are providing fewer and fewer administrative supports.

**Q:** What are the implications of your findings for higher education? What's at stake when academics feel they can't find balance between work and home?

**Lincoln:** We are finding that some of our best and brightest will leave science.

**Q:** What are your recommendations for higher education? What can institutions do to help? How should science as a whole respond?

**Ecklund:** Universities need to follow the most family-friendly corporations. Provide child care centers that are affordable for all scientists. Provide better nonstandard child care benefits, like child care credits for when scientists need to travel for scientific work and need to take their children with them. Make leaves and stopping tenure clocks automatic upon the birth of a child. Develop checks and balances at the department level. Empower individuals to change cultures. The last chapter of our book provides extensive recommendations for universities and science departments, as well as national scientific funding bodies, like the NIH and the NSF.


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