

BALANCING ACT

A Message for Our New President

Female undergraduate and graduate students voted for Obama in great numbers. So what do they want from him now?

By Mary Ann Mason

Dear President-elect Obama,

Your victory was glorious and hard-won. You are well aware that it could not have been accomplished without the enthusiastic support of women (53 percent of us versus 47 percent of men), particularly young women (66 percent of women between the ages of 18 and 29 voted for you). College women came out in huge numbers, knocked on doors, changed the hearts and minds of their elders, and made contributions to your campaign from the bottom of their nearly empty pocketbooks. You depended on them to win, and now they are counting on you.

As a professor and an author, I speak with hundreds of female undergraduates and graduate students in their 20s and 30s. I know what they want: They want both careers and families.

They want to be teachers, lawyers, engineers, biologists, doctors, and professors. They want to open new businesses, make scientific discoveries, improve the environment. They believe that finally the barriers have fallen and all careers are open to them. But they also want a family. The members of this new generation will defer marriage and motherhood many years to focus on their careers. Still, they expect to find a life partner and have at least one child before their biological clock runs out.

But they are worried. They worry that they will not be able to handle both their chosen profession and their family responsibilities. They know that child care is impossibly expensive and notoriously unreliable. They understand that employers offer some family leave when children are born, or when family members are sick, but it may be unpaid. They also know it is far from certain that they will have medical insurance to cover illness when it strikes a family member. They know that part-time work to accommodate family life in their chosen professions is poorly paid and insecure. They fear that if they leave the job market to take care of their children for any period of time, there may be no job for them to return to. They know that many mothers before them, maybe even their own mothers, have had to give up their professional dreams to handle the realities of family life.

These young women look around their universities and grow discouraged. They have few role models and fewer mentors. In most universities, far less than half of the tenure-track faculty members are women, and in some physical-science departments, the number is in the single digits. Fewer still are mothers: In the small ranks of tenured female professors, only 44 percent are married with children compared with 70 percent of the tenured men.

Of the 62 members of the Association of American Universities (the most prominent research institutions in the country), only 68 percent offer paid parental leave to faculty members (usually six weeks), and 24 percent offer such benefits to graduate students. Young female scholars also see that the majority of their classes are taught by part-time or adjunct lecturers, many of whom are mothers with children and receive no health benefits at all. These are not universities that welcome families.

Money is a problem for these students and not just because of the recession. Most will begin their careers with a large debt from their undergraduate years, and often from graduate school as well. Motherhood does not exempt women from a lifelong obligation to work. Most mothers return to the workplace within six months following childbirth. They are not thinking about "pin money" — they are demanding real wages.

Equal participation in the workplace has not, alas, translated into equal compensation. According to the American Association of Women, more than 40 years after the Equal Pay Act of 1963, women still earn about 77 percent of male wages; and they earn less than men in every field. If a woman and a man make the same choices, will they receive the same pay? The answer is no.

Your wife, Michelle, a working mother herself, is well aware of these disparities and has vowed to make working families a priority as first lady.

"It's time for the leaders of this country not only to champion these causes, but to fight for the issues every single day," Michelle Obama told about 1,000 people at the National Partnership for Women and Families' annual luncheon during your presidential campaign. She relayed struggles she has heard on the campaign trail from working mothers who were nervous about taking time off, and from women whose male counterparts at the office earn more.

President-elect Obama, you made a good start when you accepted the Democratic Party nomination in Denver, where you spoke powerfully about the need to focus on the economic security of families. You told us that you would work on paid family leave and sick days, affordable child-care and college costs, as well as the need for all Americans to have access to health care.

Now let's be specific. Here is what our university students need as they begin having families:

- A federal program for preschool and after-school childcare for all families. Such programs are a fact of life in many European countries. The last time our nation

considered such a child-care initiative was in 1971 when President Richard M. Nixon vetoed it.

- A safe high-quality public-school system where students can learn the important skills that they will need and where science and technology are compellingly presented to both girls and boys.
- An affordable university education that will not require a lifelong debt burden.
- Full-time work that is equally compensated for both women and men. Part-time work that receives compensation proportional to the rate of full-time work, with full benefits for those who work at least 50 percent of the time.
- Paid family leave. The Family and Medical Leave Act, which offers 12 weeks of unpaid leave for the medical needs of family members, took almost 20 years to become legislation; but it was only a start. Some states are already taking the lead on this: California offers 16 weeks of partially paid leave.
- High-quality affordable health insurance for every family.
- A flexible workplace that allows parents to meet the needs of their growing families without retribution, to take time off or accept a reduced workload when necessary. The federal government already offers this to its employees. Why shouldn't all Americans have the same opportunity?

President-elect Obama, we have faith that together we can bring about these critical changes in your first term. This is for your daughters. This is for the future of America.

Mary Ann Mason is a professor and co-director of the Berkeley Law Center on Health, Economic & Family Security and the author (with her daughter, Eve Ekman), of Mothers on the Fast Track. She writes regularly on work and family issues for our Balancing Act column, and invites readers to send in questions or personal concerns about those issues. She will answer your questions in a future column. E-mail your comments to careers@chronicle.com or to mamason@law.berkeley.edu. To read previous Balancing Act columns, see http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/columns/balancing_act