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The Pyramid Problem

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We know that women now receive slightly more than 50 percent of the Ph.D.'s awarded by American universities. So is it just a matter of time before women move through the faculty ranks and achieve gender equality with men in academe?

Regrettably not. Consider the pyramid problem. We measure gender equity in three important ways: representation on the faculty, pay, and family formation. Put simply: There are far fewer women than men at the top of the academic hierarchy; those women are paid somewhat less than men, and they are much less likely then men to have had children. At the bottom of the academic hierarchy—in the adjunct and part-time positions—there are far more women than men, and they are disproportionately women with children. Women in adjunct jobs have children at the same rate as men but receive the lowest wages in academe.

That pyramid is unlikely to change its shape without serious structural transformation.

The two main dimensions of career equity that are regularly measured by the American Association of University Professors are comparative wages and representation across professorial ranks. Women have, without a doubt, made progress in faculty representation. According to the AAUP's 2006 gender-equity indicators report, women

account for 38 percent of faculty members over all. Women make up 46 percent of assistant professors, 38 percent of associate professors, and 23 percent of full professors.

But all tenure-tracks jobs are not of equal weight. Some have higher status and higher pay. Women are most well represented at community colleges (both those with and without academic ranks) and least well represented at doctoral-level institutions. Women make up 50 percent of the faculty at community colleges, 41 percent at baccalaureate and master's degree colleges, and 33 percent at doctoral-level universities. Most women are not obtaining jobs at the more prestigious and higher-paying research universities where they earned their degrees.

And women are greatly overrepresented below the tenure track in the low-paying, nontenured positions. Women make up 58 percent of instructors and 54 percent of lecturers, and hold 51 percent of unranked positions.

What about salary equity? The story here is also not promising.

According to a recent article by John W. Curtis, "Faculty Salary Equity: Still a Gender Gap?," in 1975-76, when the AAUP first added systematic salary data by gender to its annual report on full-time faculty salaries, "the overall average salary for women faculty members was 81 percent of that for men. In the 2009-10 report released in April, the proportion was ... 81 percent."

Curtis continues: "The 2009-10 AAUP data indicate that women full-time faculty members earn less than their male colleagues at each of the traditional professorial ranks (professor, associate professor, and assistant professor), and overall in each institutional category (doctoral, master's, baccalaureate, and associate). Although women are approaching salary parity with men at community colleges, even there women have a slight overall disadvantage. The overall salary disparity between men and women is the product of both rank and institutional location: Women are more likely to hold faculty positions at lower faculty ranks, and they make up a greater proportion of the faculty at the institutions that pay the lowest salaries."

Moreover, he added, "the AAUP data do not even take into account women's overrepresentation in part-time faculty positions, which pay piecework wages and rarely provide benefits." Nor does the association count the armies of female lecturers and adjuncts, who now teach more than half of all undergraduate courses and are, disproportionately, mothers.

Our research at the University of California at Berkeley, based on a survey of doctoral recipients conducted by the National Science Foundation, helps explain why women fall to the bottom of the academic pyramid in terms of rank status and pay. We found that, across all disciplines, women with children were 38 percent less likely than men with

children to achieve tenure. Most women do not even enter a tenure-track position. Instead, they are twice as likely as men with children to work in part-time or nontenure-track positions.

Many women (and some men) take part-time jobs because they don't think they can handle a demanding full-time, tenure-track post during the early years of raising children. Some expect to eventually switch to the tenure track. They may not be so concerned about their low pay and marginalized status because they believe that being an adjunct is a temporary phase, one that will end once the children are older. Unfortunately, few women get the opportunity to join the tenure track at a later date.

A third way to measure women's progress in academe is to determine whether their professional gains have come at the cost of family formation.

Our research at Berkeley has revealed that only one in three women who take a fast-track university job before having a child ever become mothers. Among tenured professors, only 44 percent of women are married with children, compared with 77 percent of men. And women who achieve tenure are more than twice as likely as men to be single 12 years after earning a Ph.D. In addition, women who are married when they begin their faculty careers are much more likely than men in the same position to divorce or separate from their spouses.

Most women, it seems, cannot have it all—tenure and a family—while most men can.

Many women choose the childless path without regret, and others are sorry about that choice. Thirty-eight percent of the faculty women we surveyed (compared with 11 percent of men) reported that they regretted not having more children. That included women who had had none at all.

Looking at the family lives of faculty members in that way suggests that gender equity is even more unbalanced in terms of marriage and family than it is in terms of career aspirations—a more sharply angled pyramid. That raises the fundamental issue of what gender equity means. In focusing on representation and salary as the measure of gender equality, we have failed to notice the widening gap between men and women in forming the families they want, as measured by marriage and children.

A true measure of gender equity in academe would look at both career (representation and salary) and family outcomes. We call that two-pronged measure the "baby-gap test," because it takes into account both the gap in professional outcomes for women with children compared with men and the gap in family formation for academically successful women. We need to ask not only how many women are professors, and what is their pay compared with men? We also need to ask how many women with children are in tenured positions compared with men with children?

Evaluating equity with those three measurements reveals that women have much further to go than would otherwise be evident. It also seems obvious that unless we level the playing fields for mothers, gender equality is not just a matter of time.

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