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Why So Few Doctoral-Student Parents?



By Mary Ann Mason

"I had my first child when I was a first-year graduate student and my second, two years later. I plan to finish this year and I am three months pregnant. They grounded me and made me focus." This young mother was beginning her seventh year of a Ph.D. program in political science at a well-known Midwestern university. But her remarks drew a skeptical reaction from the group of graduate students who had come to an informal lunch meeting to talk about babies and careers.

"I failed my Ph.D. exams when my son was 6 months old and breast-feeding," countered another woman at the lunch who is an engineer. "My adviser suggested I finish with a master's."

Not many babies are born during the graduate-student years. Exact figures are elusive, but a study we did of doctoral students at the University of California indicated that about 13 percent become parents by the time they graduate. Universities that offer part-time degree programs and a large number of master's programs are likely to attract older adults who have more children.

Why do so few people use the graduate-school years to start a family? After all, it's a period when students have more flexible schedules and the possibility of a community with which to share the experience of parenting. These years offer many benefits for young parents. The mother of two and would-be political scientist credited family

housing—a place where children played freely under many adult eyes and baby sitters were always available—with her ability to balance family and work.

Most of the women in graduate school are there during their peak childbearing years. More than two-thirds of the women in our doctoral survey agreed that the ages between 28 and 34 would be the optimal time to have a first child—the very years in which they are struggling to obtain a Ph.D. Yet 33 is now the average age at which women receive a Ph.D., and they cannot expect to achieve tenure before they are 39. They can see their biological clocks running out before they achieve the golden ring of tenure.

Given those fact, the question remains: Why don't more women start having children while they are pursuing a Ph.D.?

Money is a major consideration. Only 13 percent of institutions in the Association of American Universities (the 62 top-ranked research universities) offer paid maternity leave to doctoral students, and only 5 percent provide dependent health care for a child.

Lack of time is also a problem. But many students defer the decision on whether to start a family for the same reasons that I did 30 years ago: They fear they will not be taken seriously and that their professors, mentors, and future employers will discourage them from continuing their studies.

In our doctoral-student survey, one student commented on her department's view of pregnant students: "There is a pervasive attitude that the female graduate student in question must now prove to the faculty that she is capable of completing her degree, even when prior to the pregnancy there were absolutely no doubts about her capabilities and ambition."

The majority of women we surveyed, as opposed to only 16 percent of the men, were concerned that pregnancy would be similarly perceived by future employers.

Science offers even more challenges for student parents, particularly mothers. The competitive race to achieve scientific breakthroughs and prove oneself offers little respite for childbirth or child rearing. The effect of parenthood on the future career options for female doctoral students whose research is supported by federal grants (the source of support for most students in science) is dramatic. Forty-six percent of the female graduate students we surveyed said they began their careers with an eye toward obtaining a faculty position at a research university. Babies changed that; only 11 percent of the students who were new mothers said they wanted to continue on that career path. Fatherhood for men similarly situated appears to have far less of an impact on their career choices—59 percent of men began their programs planning to pursue a research-intensive academic career, and 45 percent who were new fathers still planned to do so.

So what needs to happen for women to be able to start families during the student years? The experience of Anna Westerstahl Stenport, a Swedish graduate student at Berkeley, provides some insight. I interviewed her several years ago when Anna had an 18-month-

old daughter, Marta, and was working on her doctorate in comparative literature. Anna was enthusiastic about having a child as a doctoral student because of the subsidized early-childhood programs and free health care available at the university.

"Marta has had two particular teachers who were absolutely wonderful," Anna said. "One of my best friends and colleagues in the department, whose son is one of Marta's best friends, is in the same day-care group, so that worked out very well too."

Surprisingly, being a student parent made economic sense. In Anna's case, she had recently switched from graduate student to lecturer status while seeking her first tenure-track job. As a result, she was no longer eligible for that top-flight child-care program and couldn't afford to pay for the care.

Anna believed that her student schedule worked fairly well with motherhood. She worked about 45 to 50 hours a week, but those hours were flexible. Having a committed partner willing to share the parenting workload was crucial: Anna's husband had a work schedule that permitted him to take care of Marta when she couldn't. Anna's experience with her faculty adviser was also positive. The adviser herself had a 4-year-old daughter and completely supported her student's maternity.

I asked if Anna thought that having a family might be an impediment on the job market. "Not right now, right here," she said, "but when I went to the job fair for the Modern Language Association last November I did not wear my wedding band nor did I bring up my family."

Time passed. I heard from Anna again about a year after her MLA trip. "You will be happy to know," she said triumphantly, "that I got a job at [a major research university], and I was pregnant at the time of the interview. Guess what? They offered me my first semester off for parental leave!"

That was indeed a happy outcome for this student parent, and a hopeful sign that the culture is inching toward "family friendliness."

Student life, as Anna relates, can offer a fairly nurturing environment for young mothers—particularly if they are not in the sciences—and there are signs that the climate is improving. Our university, like many others, stops the clock for student parents, who are allowed to leave for a semester and return without penalty. We also offer six weeks of paid maternity leave and a substantial grant to help student parents with their child-raising costs. Yale University has pioneered a five-year medical-school plan for student parents who wish to withdraw for a year.

There are indications that attitudes are changing as well. At a recent faculty meeting, a distinguished senior scientist took me aside and proudly announced that two of his students were pregnant. He assured me that this would not hinder their careers, and that he had organized a baby shower for them.

So what are you hearing? Are more graduate students choosing to have children while they pursue a doctorate? Should they?

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