
Today's News

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Grad Students Think Twice About Jobs in Academe

By [AUDREY WILLIAMS JUNE](#)

When Joanna Doran thinks of what her life would be like as a tenure-track professor at a top research university, the images that come to mind give her pause.

Ms. Doran, who is married and the mother of a 2-year-old girl, already struggles to balance the demands of her family life while pursuing a Ph.D. in social welfare at the University of California at Berkeley. Networking with peers in the evenings typically means barely seeing her daughter and her husband, also a graduate student. The possibility that her daughter won't land a summer slot this year at her Berkeley-run day care is enough to send the couple into a tailspin.

"At first I was thinking, Everything is possible," says Ms. Doran, 34, a fifth-year graduate student. But though she is still interested in a research-professor position, "I'm now much more likely to fall outside of the academic pipeline."

According to new research from Berkeley, Ms. Doran's negative view of faculty life at a top research institution is common. The large study of the University of California's graduate students revealed that less than half—29 percent of women and 46 percent of men—perceived major research institutions to be family-friendly workplaces for tenure-track professors. While in graduate school, many begin to think about other careers paths.

That means the pipeline for junior professors at top research universities could become increasingly leaky.

"In this profession, everything is very front-ended, and that's a pressure-cooker situation," says Mary Ann Mason, referring to the dizzying schedules of Ph.D. students and pretenure faculty members. Ms. Mason, one of the authors of a report about the survey in the most recent issue of *Academe*, is a professor and co-director of the Berkeley Law Center of Health, Economic and Family Security. "This generation of graduate students is completely different. They no longer see how that will work for them," she says.

Work-Life Balance

About 8,400 Ph.D. students from nine of the 10 University of California campuses responded to the survey. It was conducted in 2006-7 by Ms. Mason and Marc Goulden, director of data initiatives in academic affairs at Berkeley, as part of the University of California Family Edge Initiative. "The degree to which they rated research universities as not family-friendly was surprising," Mr. Goulden says. Their ideas about teaching-intensive universities were quite different, however. Eighty-two percent of men and 73 percent of women saw those institutions as the most family-friendly career choice among careers both inside and outside academe,

according to the survey.

Ms. Mason says that's "wishful thinking." The teaching loads carried by professors at such institutions, coupled with how intensely involved they are in the lives of students, are likely to make achieving work-life balance there difficult as well, she says.

Still, some Ph.D. students have decided to take that chance. Todd J. Ide, a second-year student in the curriculum, teaching, and educational-policy program at Michigan State University, plans to work at a small teaching institution or a community college. He calculates that teaching five classes at a local community college would yield a workweek of 40 to 45 hours, plus the flexibility he needs as a parent.

"The conversations I have with people in my cohort, none of us want to work in a research-intensive university," says Mr. Ide, a 41-year-old who has two daughters, ages 6 and 4. "None of us want to be in that environment—the whole 'publish or perish' paradigm."

Mr. Ide came to Michigan State from Western Michigan University, where he earned two master's degrees—one in the fall of 2006 and another in the spring of 2007—after teaching high school for eight years. He was juggling family demands back then, teaching as an adjunct, and taking classes mostly at night so he could care for his children while his wife worked as an elementary-school teacher. Since then, his struggle to balance work and family has intensified.

"I get a lot more of the feeling that most of the faculty here aren't cognizant that many of their grad students have lives outside of their classwork and the university," says Mr. Ide, a teaching assistant at Michigan State. "They still expect you to do the 40 to 60 hours a week between classes, teaching responsibilities, and research. They need to come to grips with the fact that their student body has changed." One sign of that change: The majority of people surveyed—74 percent of men and 84 percent of women—were concerned about whether their future career path would be a family-friendly one.

Cathy A. Trower, a researcher at Harvard University who studies the attitudes of junior faculty members, says it makes sense to be wary of everything that a focus on research entails.

"With research, you're at the mercy of the outside world," Ms. Trower says. "You've got to bring in money. You've got to write grants, and maybe you've never done that before. And then finding the time to write is a challenge."

Taking on those tasks as a parent "becomes pretty daunting," Ms. Trower says. "People have to ask themselves, Do I really want to do that?"

Leaving Academe

More alarming for research institutions, the study also shows the career goals of Ph.D. students shifting as they progressed toward their degrees. Forty-five percent of men and 39 percent of the women surveyed intended to become professors at a research institution when they started their doctoral program. However, once into their programs, the numbers dropped to 36 percent and 27 percent respectively. For some, careers in business, government, or industry were more attractive at that point, despite the family-friendly reputation teaching institutions had among respondents.

"When you're at a research university you might look down on teaching institutions as a lower rung," says Karie Frasch, another of the report's authors and manager of the university's Family Edge projects. "Business or government might be seen as a better way to go if you're not going to do what you thought you were going to do."

The survey also shows that “a bad job market” was the reason 30 percent of women and virtually the same percentage of men decided against pursuing careers as research professors. Since the survey was conducted, rocky economic times have caused faculty hiring to grind to a halt at many institutions, meaning even more graduate students could decide to make a switch for the same reason.

The trend of leaving academe behind was even more pronounced among those in the sciences—particularly women. Only 20 percent of women in science still wanted to become professors at research institutions, compared with 31 percent at the outset of their Ph.D. programs.

For women, balancing work and family is a major problem. Data from the study on graduate students who were already parents showed that mothers put in a mind-boggling 100-plus hours a week on Ph.D. work, employment, housework, and caregiving.

Ms. Mason and Mr. Goulden also produced the groundbreaking study “Do Babies Matter?,” which revealed, among other things, that women who had babies early in their academic careers were less likely to achieve tenure. In fact, Ms. Mason says, female faculty members often put off having children until they earn tenure—when they are likely to be near the end of their childbearing years—and have fewer children as a result.

Results from the new survey indicate that delay results in few role models for graduate students looking to balance family and work.

A Call for Action

In the end, the report says, research universities will have to do something about the factors that make graduate students turn their backs on the professoriate. For instance, the university can’t continue to be “all or nothing” when it comes to the career trajectory of a professor, says Ms. Mason. Also, academic parents should have access to resources that would make it easy and culturally acceptable to have children at any point in their careers.

“Baby-centric policies are easy for people to do. But what happens after the baby is here?” Mr. Goulden says. “There are issues of, Is there care available? Is it affordable? Are there extensions to timelines for your degree program? Can you go part time and not lose status?”

Megan Moore, the mother of a boy who is nearly 3 and a girl who turns 1 this month, says she and her husband purposely chose to have children as soon as she received her Ph.D. Her son was born before she began her postdoctoral appointment as assistant director of the Center for Renaissance Studies at the Newberry Library, in Chicago. Ms. Moore’s daughter was born during her postdoc appointment. “I didn’t think the support was there as a graduate student,” says Ms. Moore, who graduated from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in 2005 with a Ph.D. in French literature.

The Newberry Library gave her seven months of maternity leave and then extended her appointment, which ends this year. “This way was just better for my biological clock,” says Ms. Moore, 31.

“I’m so glad that I’ve gone ahead and done my personal life the way I wanted to and didn’t try to conform to the academic rhythm,” Ms. Moore says. “Academic life is very important to me. But I also have such a rich family life, and I wouldn’t trade that for anything.”

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