

Success means blurring the lines

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For a scientist, it is almost impossible to draw strict boundaries between work and life. To meet professional expectations, we make enormous commitments to conduct research, publish, write grants, teach and carry out administrative duties. Being a scientist is not a 9-to-5 gig but an all-the-time job. Success often requires integration, rather than segregation, of work and life — more a juggling act than a high-wire balance routine.

Scientific research attracts people who are passionate about their work. I am fortunate to love what I do, and rarely think of it as an unwelcome imposition on my ‘real life.’ Making the boundary between work and life fluid can enhance both.

It is often not possible to anticipate moments when ‘life’ will overtake ‘work,’ and many research science jobs allow for flexibility in day-to-day scheduling. When sick children or family events demand extra time, the work-life equation can adapt. However, flexibility can be more limited for scientists at teaching-oriented institutions with rigid course schedules.

Despite the advantages of being a scientist, women may find competing demands particularly burdensome. For financial and career reasons, they often defer having children until they secure a faculty position. However, expectations for productivity remain high, even during pregnancy and maternity leave, and pre-tenure scientists have a fixed period in which to demonstrate success.

Multiple demands:

Statistically, women in the United States contribute more than 50 percent of the **time spent on childcare and housekeeping**, even when their earnings equal or exceed those of their male partners. Female scientists are thus likely to face multiple demands, whereas their male colleagues may remain relatively free to dedicate extra time to work. This disparity can ultimately lead to differences in grant funding and publications.

Promotion and retention policies at academic institutions often make little allowance for the demands of childrearing, disproportionately affecting women’s success. Indeed, women leave academic science at higher rates than men, and the number of female faculty, even at junior levels, falls far short of the number of male faculty. At my institution, about 20 percent of all science faculty are women.

In addition to balancing heavy loads at home and in the lab, women scientists often find themselves in high demand for administrative work. Most institutions laudably strive to include women on committees and advisory boards, but there are too few women to share this labor. Such efforts are a valuable community service, but they generally do not count toward promotion, and they take up time that could be spent on science.

Easing the burden:

How do we ease the disproportionate burden on women? At the personal level, equally sharing parenting and household duties between partners can free women to focus on professional goals. With two children under 5 years old, a key to my success as a scientist has been to split childcare 50-50 with my spouse and hire outside help for housework.

However, this strategy relies on financial resources and a partner with equal flexibility, and is not possible for everyone.

At the institutional level, academic institutions should develop policies that acknowledge family demands and promote the success and retention of female scientists. Many institutions already offer a tenure clock extension, but this option is insufficient to offset the time cost of childrearing, and could be made more flexible. Providing high-quality, affordable childcare on campus could also ease the constraints and sometimes staggering financial costs of juggling family and career.