Women Higher Education Administrators with Children: Negotiating Personal and Professional Lives

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The purpose of this exploratory study was to understand how female higher education administrators with children made sense of and negotiated their multiple roles and commitments as professionals and parents. Women at the professional level of dean or higher, at a college or university, and who had school-aged children or younger were interviewed to determine how they negotiated their personal and professional lives. Findings detailed motivations to pursue advanced careers as well as advantages and disadvantages of managing career and family.

Only recently—with women’s increasing presence in the academy—have we begun to pay attention to how family affects faculty careers (Bassett, 2005; Colbeck & Drago, 2004; Marcus, 2007; Mason & Goulden, 2002; Perna, 2005; Sallee, 2008; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Twombly, 2007; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2005). Surprisingly, the same attention has not been given to how having children affects women administrators. The very nature of administrative work, including long hours and weekend work, would seem to pose a particular challenge for women administrators who have children. The purpose of this study is to understand how women higher education administrators with children make sense of and negotiate their multiple roles and commitments as professionals and parents.

Examining the complexities of managing a career and a family may be particularly important given the perceived lack of qualified individuals in the college and university leadership pipeline. The growing organizational complexity, increasing enrollments, and cutbacks in state and federal funding are just a few of the obstacles facing postsecondary leaders today.
One of the most significant and pending challenges confronting higher education is transition in leadership. Currently, 49% of all college and university presidents are age 61 or older (American Council on Education [ACE], 2007), meaning most will likely retire within the next 10 years. Similarly, key administrative staffs are expected to retire at increasing rates. Twenty-nine percent of chief academic officers (CAO) are 61 or older. Since over 40% of new presidents were former CAOs, the presidential pipeline is greatly affected by the pending retirements of CAOs. These continuous challenges, along with the anticipated retirements of senior-level administrators, leave some believing that developing a new generation of leaders may be one of the greatest challenges facing higher education (VanDerLinden, 2004).

This expected leadership crisis may present an opportunity for women to advance into positions that were previously assumed by men. As the number of women working in college and university administration increases, understanding how they successfully manage work and family are keys to their advancement and retention. Learning from women who have assumed senior-level administrative positions while raising children may provide insights into how others can achieve the same personal and professional successes.

Women in Higher Education

The most comprehensive portrait of college and university presidents and senior-level administrators is provided by the ACE reports: On the Pathway to the Presidency (King & Gomez, 2007) and The American College President (ACE, 2007). In 2006, 23% of college and university presidents were women compared to 10% in 1986 (ACE, 2007). Also, the ACE study discovered that 89% of male presidents were married compared to only two-thirds of the female presidents. Additionally, 68% of women presidents had children versus 91% of male presidents. Regarding other administrative positions, 45% of all senior administrators were women (King & Gomez, 2008). The percentage of women by position is as follows:

- 38% Senior Academic Officer
- 36% Dean
- 43% VP for Administration
- 49% VP for External Affairs
- 45% VP for Student Affairs/Enrollment Management
- 50% Central Academic Affairs
- 55% Chief of Staff
- 56% Senior Diversity Officer
These numbers suggest that colleges and universities have an existing pool of qualified, experienced women to tap into to enhance gender diversity at the presidential level (King & Gomez, 2007). Despite this pool, the question of why few women advance to the presidency still exists. Additionally, of those women who do assume the presidency, why a disproportionate number remain single or childless compared to their male counterparts remains.

Although a growing number of women are assuming senior-level positions, most assume roles such as directors, managers, and coordinators. The National Center for Education Statistics (2003) reports that in 2003 women constituted over half (51%) of the administrative, executive, and managerial positions in U.S. higher education institutions. While the presence of women is noted, women remain disproportionately concentrated in the middle-level rather than senior administrative positions (Chamberlain, 1988; Kaplan & Tinsley, 1989; Rosser, 2000; Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1985; Touchton & Davis, 1991; Twale, 1995). It remains puzzling why in light of the increasing number of women faculty and administrators in academe, so few advance to senior-level position. Studying those who have assumed senior-level leadership positions may provide insight into how others can do the same.

While more research is needed to determine why women are not advancing, scholars speculate that women may be professionally limited either by their own choosing or by higher education’s inability to support them adequately (Apter, 1993). Levtov argues that because of “socialized professional standards,” women may be led to believe that “the realities of combining a family and a career may be incompatible with the current values of the profession” (2001, p. 17), thus forcing them to choose between career and family. Unfortunately, the research literature is largely silent on whether having children affects women’s advancement to senior-level positions in higher education administration.

The work culture in higher education is one that may demand long hours of hard work (Levtov, 2001). Those beginning their careers, especially in student affairs, are generally the first to be asked to commit themselves to evening and weekend engagements, to live on the job, or to otherwise structure their time so that the task of managing a family would be especially difficult (Nobbe & Manning, 1997). The values held by higher education and the realities in the field may contribute to tough decisions for women administrators who have or are contemplating having children.
In addition to being a time-consuming profession, career advancement in higher education often requires relocation, which typically is not an option for women with children in school and in dual-career relationships (Sagara & Johnsrud, 1985). These realities, coupled with demands from home, may lead women college administrators to question their career choices. As Jones and Komives (2001) wrote:

While a “balanced life” continues to be an elusive goal for many women professionals, women in senior-level . . . positions must reconcile the great demands of their work and with other interests and responsibilities. The irony in this situation is that successful women leaders often suggest that part of their success is due to the well-rounded lives they lead, which includes time for relaxation and renewal, family, and interests outside the workplace. However, the realities of senior leadership positions do not always support the matching of espoused values with such activities. (p. 242)

As more women join the ranks of higher education administration and advance to senior positions, it is imperative that their needs be assessed in order to support and retain them. While women themselves are primarily responsible for managing work and family and for coping with the many pressures associated with assuming both roles, the need to study and learn from their experiences becomes more urgent. Before any meaningful effort can be made to enhance the recruitment and retention of working women, we need to understand how working affects mothers, their families, and careers. This study provides positive examples and encouragement that indeed women can advance to senior-level administrative positions and also have children. Learning from women who have already successfully balanced their senior-level careers and children provides insights into how others may do the same. This research provides critical perspectives and hope for women who intend to assume similar positions while raising a family.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE—WHERE ARE THE CHILDREN?

Although some literature has spotlighted women administrators’ career trajectories, advancement, professional development, education, and mentoring (Anders, 1997; LeBlanc, 1993; McDade, 1997; McFarland &
Ebbers, 1998; Nidiffer & Bashaw, 2001; Warner & DeFleur, 1993), there is a noted underrepresentation about the implications of these activities in the careers of senior-level women administrators with children. While the literature addresses various issues of women in administration, all neglect to reference, mention, or consider the competing demands of childbearing and rearing made on female administrators.

More broadly, scholars studied five general topics related to women in higher education administration. First, several, for instance, explored common characteristics associated with the career advancement of women administrators (Earwood-Smith, Jordan-Cox, Hudson, & Smith, 1990; Evans & Kuh, 1983; Ironside, 1981; Kuyper, 1987; Rickard, 1985). Characteristics frequently considered were educational background, employment history, willingness to relocate, presence of role models, and marital status. None included children as a variable in their analyses, providing no information on whether having a family helps or hinders women’s advancement into senior-level positions. Other scholars explored attrition as it relates to women administrators (Bender, 1980; Burns, 1982; Hersi, 1993; Holmes, Verrier, & Chisholm, 1983; Richmond & Sherman, 1991). Their findings suggest that women leave the profession because of low pay, limited ability to advance within an institution, burnout due to long hours, and discrimination. Work-family issues were not mentioned or considered as potential reasons why women leave the profession. Still other scholars examined the overall job satisfaction of women in higher education administration (Bender, 1980; Reeves, 1975). This research revealed that women administrators were less satisfied than their male counterparts. This lack of satisfaction was attributed to factors such as lack of support and work-related stress.

Next, researchers explored the barriers that women administrators overcame to achieve professional success (Tinsley, 1985; McEwen, Williams, & McHugh Engstrom, 1991). These studies addressed barriers such as discrimination and the perceived “glass ceiling,” but they did not consider whether having a family was a barrier to success. Last, scholars investigated the role that mentoring played in promoting or hindering the professional success and advancement of women administrators (Blackhurst, 2000; Hersi, 1993; Tinsley, 1985; Twale & Jelinek, 1996). Their findings suggested that mentoring was needed to encourage women to obtain advanced degrees, to write for publication, to become involved in professional associations, and to remain in the profession. None discussed mentorship as it related to work-family issues.
Although most of the literature pertaining to women higher education administrators neglects to consider children as a variable, there exists a small body of research on the experiences of women administrators with children. For the most part, the extant literature paints a largely negative picture. For example, a series of articles discussed how women administrators with children had higher levels of stress than those who do not (Berwick, 1992; Blackhurst, Brandt, & Kalinowski, 1988; Scott & Spooner, 1989). These stresses stemmed out of problems with day care arrangements, conflicts between organizational and family demands, and fatigue.

Next, other studies claimed that having a family limited the professional success and advancement of women administrators with children. Warner & DeFleur (1993) suggested that interruptions in careers due to child rearing were impediments to career advancement. LeBlanc (1993) asserted that the advancement of women administrators with children was limited because of the time required by their families. Since higher education administration often requires late night and weekend commitments, scheduling issues become quite complicated for working mothers. Although Marshall and Jones (1990) discovered no significant relationship between childbearing and career development in higher education, the majority of the women administrators in their study believed that childbearing hurt their careers. Nobbe and Manning’s (1997) research supported this point. They found that women administrators with children gave up or changed career goals when they added children to their lives.

The current research on women administrators with children is largely negative, outdated, and limited in scope. Much of the research pertaining to women administrators overlooked children as a “variable of interest.” Most studies did not offer positive examples of women administrators with children, including their strategies for negotiating multiple roles, advice for others in the same position, or suggestions for improving higher education work environments. In addition, most of the studies available were quantitative in nature. This research did not allow for the sharing of perspectives, experiences, or detailed examples.

To address these voids in the literature, this study provides insights into how senior-level women administrators negotiated the complexities of managing work and family. Understanding the experiences of women who have advanced to senior-level positions while having children offers promising information into how others may successfully navigate both roles. This study provides a deeper understanding and explanation of the realities faced by administrative mothers and also encourages further
engagement and research about this increasingly common issue on our nation’s college and university campuses.

RESEARCH DESIGN

PURPOSE

Since little is known about female college and university administrators with children, this study was designed to bring attention to the personal and professional issues in their everyday lives. The purpose of this exploratory study was to understand how women higher education administrators with children made sense of and negotiated their multiple roles and commitments as professionals and parents.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions informed this inquiry:

1. How does having a family affect the personal and professional realities of women administrators with children?

2. What rewards and frustrations accompany the shared roles of professional and parent?

The findings offer an in-depth look at how being a mother and an administrator has positively and negatively affected the lives of the participants. With an emphasis on the pros and cons of managing work and family, the intent of this paper is to inform its readers of the realities of assuming both roles.

RESEARCH METHOD

Since one of the goals of this investigation was to gain understanding of this underresearched group, a qualitative, narrative inquiry method was used to investigate participants’ in-depth perspectives. Qualitative inquiry allows for the study of the work-family phenomenon with greater understanding and detail specifically from the participants’ vantage points. More specifically, life story research was conducted. Life story research was effective in that “life stories themselves embody what we need to study: the relation between this instance of social action (this particular story) and the social world the narrator shares with others; the ways in which culture
marks, shapes, and/or constrains this narrative; and the ways in which this narrator makes use of cultural resources and struggles with cultural constraints” (Chase, 1995, p. 21). These characteristics of life story research were relevant to this investigation.

**Sample**

The intent of this research was to contribute to current knowledge on women college and university administrators by including the perspectives of women administrators who also had children. The sample configuration selected supported the ultimate goal of the study, to learn more about how female administrators manage the dual roles of administration and motherhood. Toward this end, 17 participants were selected based on their ability to meet the study’s criteria.

All participants were (1) female college or university administrators who (2) had children. The women selected were employed at least at the level of dean of a functional higher education unit. All selected participants reported either directly to the president or a vice president. In large part because this study intended to share the insights of administrative women with children who achieved professional success by advancing to a senior-level position in higher education administration, this sampling criterion was pivotal. To be sure, while one may learn a great deal from women entering the field who have children, the purpose of this study was to provide positive examples of female administrators with children who were more established in their careers and had achieved career success. Second, of those women who met the first sampling criterion, only those who had children school-aged or younger were considered for participation in this study. The age of the children was important, as younger or school-aged children tend to have more parental needs than adult children. By investigating women with younger children, current competing demands generated by work and family were explored.

The 17 participants in this study assumed professional positions in academic affairs (5), development (3), finance (1), legal council (1), marketing (1), and student affairs (7). They held the positions of president (2), vice president (6), associate/assistant vice president (7), and dean (2). They were employed at a variety of institutional types from large public research universities to community colleges in six different states.
Data Collection

Interviewing was the primary source of data collection. From interviews, the stories of others were shared. “If we take seriously the idea that people make sense of experience and communicate meaning through narration, then in-depth interviews should become an occasion in which we ask for life stories” (Chase, 1995, p. 2). Life stories were solicited by asking open-ended and exploratory questions that allowed the interviewee to “tell her story” from her own perspective. Interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and were typically followed up with additional phone calls and e-mails. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Copies of the transcripts were shared with the participants to verify the content of the transcriptions.

In addition to interviews, a variety of documents were included and analyzed in this study. First, each participant was invited (not required) to share personal materials such as photographs, resumes, awards, published works, or other memorabilia. These documents were used to develop deeper insights into the life of each woman.

Second, institutional documents that referred to work-family issues were also reviewed. The review of these documents occurred before each interview. With prior knowledge of the institution’s work-family benefits, each participant’s knowledge and utilization of these benefits was examined. Participants were asked about their familiarity with the various policies and their willingness to take advantage of these policies. In addition to institutional work-family documents, campus mission statements were collected and analyzed.

Analysis Procedures

Interviews were analyzed via the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Stauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). While using this method, the interviews were simultaneously coded and analyzed in order to develop concepts: “By continually comparing specific incidents in the data, the researcher refines these concepts, identifies their properties, explores their relationships to one another, and integrates them into a coherent theory” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 127). While various types of coding categories may be used in qualitative research, in this study coding categories were not predetermined. Instead, codes suggested themselves out of the data. Using this method of analysis, the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis came from the data. They emerged out
of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis (Patton, 1990). These codes came from close and repeated listenings, coupled with careful attentive transcription (Riessman, 1993).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) offer four criteria to help ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In this study, triangulation, member checks, thick description and an audit trail were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**FINDINGS**

There is little dispute that working mothers have complex and often competing roles between their personal and professional lives. While the demands of both a career and children can be challenging, participants also shed light on the many benefits of assuming both roles. The women in this study candidly shared the sacrifices, trade-offs, and tensions that resulted from their responsibilities as parents and professionals. They also communicated the advantages and added meaning to their lives. The two sections below review the realities of managing both a career and a family. The first examines the compromises and downsides. Also included are recommendations for offsetting these negative aspects. The second details the rewards and benefits.

**COMPROMISES AND TRADE-OFFS**

In this section, insights into some of the less than positive realities are discussed. Accordingly, in this section the difficulties participants experienced as mothers and senior-level college or university administrators, focusing specifically on the professional compromises they made, the personal trade-offs they experienced, and the emotional tolls that characterized their lives as working mothers, are examined. While participants noted how their dual roles required hard work and sacrifice, they also recommended strategies for overcoming these problems. Recommendations for recognizing, coping with or surmounting these possible pitfalls are included.

*Professional Compromises*

Participants in this investigation candidly discussed the varied professional compromises they made throughout their careers. These included accepting only positions that were conducive for their families, foregoing education,
limiting their involvement in professional organizations, and making less money.

Always considering the needs of their children first, the women discussed professional positions they accepted and declined based on how well they met the needs of their families. Others simply did not allow themselves to consider positions that forced them to relocate. This finding was consistent with Apter’s research (1993) that women sometimes limited their careers by their own choosing.

Hope explained the conscious decision she made not to relocate her family, despite her awareness that this decision limited her career advancement:

Most people in [administration] move around quite a bit before they get to a top position . . . I made a decision early on that I wasn’t going to do that. I didn’t want to do all that moving with my children, and my husband had a good job that he liked. It didn’t make sense to uproot. I never even looked for other positions. I teach in the graduate program, and I used to be a little jealous when all the new grad students were getting these new jobs. They were excited about moving to new places and then I stayed here. I would go to national conferences and I’d see people who I taught, my students, who were now deans and I was still a director. But, that was okay, because I had to make those sacrifices, and yes it was a conscious decision to do that because of my family.

Besides discussing the trade-offs they made regarding the advancement of their careers, several women noted that they chose to forego advanced education because of their hectic work-family schedules. Lack of time and energy simply did not allow for the added responsibility of graduate studies. In these cases, the women made conscious decisions to defer their educations in order to maintain greater harmony between home and work.

Ruth, for example, explained her decision to not continue her education:

There’s some choices I’ve made. I don’t have a Ph.D. People know that. I mean I’m very clear that I didn’t have time to get a Ph.D. I wasn’t willing to give up the time to do that based on the way that my life was going. Well, this woman said I would never amount to anything without a Ph.D. I thought, “Well, okay, fine. I’m doing what I like to do so, okay, but [continuing my education is] not something that I can do right now.”
Many study participants also discussed the compromises they struck regarding their involvement in professional organizations. Involvement in these groups often meant the obligation to travel and the assumption of additional, time-consuming responsibilities. With overflowing plates, these working mothers simply did not have the time to become significantly involved in professional organizations. Hope shared:

[Not participating in professional organizations] is a sacrifice I’ve made. I go to one conference a year, which for me, was primarily to go to rest and just to get away. I never got involved with the associations. That was one thing that I just didn’t have time to do . . . There’re certain things you have to do if you want to be involved in those national organizations, in terms of contacts you need to make, networking, committees you need to be on; and I just made a choice early on that that was something I couldn’t do.

Whether because of passed-up professional opportunities, perceived lack of professional commitment, or unwillingness to work extensive hours, a few women in this study also believed they made less money because of their decisions to have children. Referencing the trade-offs in her life, Megan agreed that she could be making a lot more money but she simply was not willing to accept positions that took too much time away from her family:

As far as the tradeoffs, I feel like I could be making a lot more money, but I’ve made the personal decision that I don’t want to work for some big company. That’s not where I want to be, but that’s a trade-off. I don’t think I would have made that decision if I didn’t have [my daughter].

The professional tradeoffs included limiting career advancement, setting aside educational goals, limiting involvement in professional associations, and earning less money. While these were realities for the participants, most recognized that they could have all these later in life. They made the necessary professional sacrifices while their children were young and parenting was more demanding. They anticipated further advancing their careers, obtaining terminal degrees, increasing their involvement in professional associations, and possibly earning more money once their children were grown. As one participant said, “I will achieve my goals. I just have to prioritize them and know that I can’t do it all at the same time.” All said, participants emphasized that while understanding the professional
downsides associated with being a mother and a senior-level administrator was important, these should be considered alongside the positive aspects associated with both roles.

**Personal Trade-offs**

The drawbacks of being both a professional and a parent can also be personal in nature. Many interviewees, for example, spoke about their limited personal time, which forced them to sacrifice downtime, sleep, exercise and wellness, and personal friendships. Others noted the marital strain that resulted from their marriages being the third priority in their lives after their children and their careers. Still, others regretted how they had sacrificed time with their children.

**Limited Time for Self**

With a limited amount of time for personal interests, a number of women shared that their priorities left little time for themselves. These women were first concerned with their children, then their careers, and then their partners. The result was that their needs often came last or were completely neglected.

Several women discussed the trade-off of sacrificing time for themselves. As Laurel, with a full measure of humor, shared:

> The big trade-off is that you can kind of forget about the personal time. All these people say, “Oh, I just need a lot of quiet time.” Well, my lord, if you need a lot of quiet time then you just don’t ever need to try any of this. I really mean this. I come last. That’s been a trade-off because you can lose your soul sometimes. There have been some times when I have gotten lost and get up and look in the mirror, and I don’t even know who I am. I am so many different things. I play so many different parts. You know, mom, wife, president, speaker, mentor . . . That’s the biggest trade-off.

Another manifestation of “no time for self” was the sleep so many of these women sacrificed. This often led to a lack of energy and mental alertness and exhaustion. Many participants discussed their lack of energy that resulted from sleep deprivation or because their days rarely included downtime. Although they may have received an average amount of sleep, their days were very full and oftentimes overwhelming because they were forced to be mentally alert both at work and at home. That took a toll on their personal health. Leslie explained:
Even though I sleep, the kids go to bed at 9:00. I go to bed at 10:00. I wake up at 6:00. I get a decent night’s sleep; but because you absolutely do not have one second of down time the entire time you are awake, it takes its toll. Even now, lunch hour, because I don’t go home. I just think that I am going to go and sit in a parking lot somewhere, wind down the windows, and take a nap; but [instead] you are out buying groceries because you have no other time.

Others commented on how their lack of energy and limited time did not allow for adequate amounts of exercise. Although some women in this study routinely exercised, other women commented on how they sacrificed their health by not exercising. As Mallory conveyed:

The other thing I don’t do is I don’t exercise enough, so I don’t have enough time for me. I really don’t [exercise] because I’m too tired. You know I’ve thought about exercising and I need to the older I get. Physically I know I need to do that, but trying to fit that in with everything else seems impossible. What usually happens for me is that I put me last and everybody else goes first. Intellectually, I know I shouldn’t do that because if I get sick, then believe me, even though my husband is home full-time, everything would fall apart and I don’t want that to happen.

A number of participants also discussed how they had little time to pursue their personal interests. This included reading, traveling, visiting museums, or even weeding a garden. They gave up these personal interests because time simply did not allow for them. When they prioritized their days, their personal needs were last, which meant they rarely had time to enjoy the things they liked to do.

Another disadvantage resulting from leading complex lives was the limited time available for personal friendships and dating. Several women, for example, expressed their longing for close female friends. Karen shared how she sacrificed personal friendships because she simply did not have time for them:

Another downside for me is before children I always had close girlfriends, and that has been pretty much sacrificed. I still have some close girlfriends, but I’m not able to spend the time with them. I miss that female community, and I don’t have it here at the university. My husband doesn’t need that like I do. He does not have this need for male friendship or companionship. I really miss my time with my female friends, and it’s pretty minimalized at this point in my life.
While many interviewees routinely admitted that they compromised many of their personal needs in order to meet the needs of their families and their careers, some did successfully manage a personal life outside of work and family. Some exercised regularly, often in the early morning while others set aside time each day to explore their personal interests and friendships. The key to their successes was to first make their interests a priority. Rather than focus on the needs of their children, home, and work, they purposefully set aside time for themselves. Next, they solicited support from their children, partners, and work colleagues. They reinforced the importance of needed personal time in order to be a better partner, mother, and employee. With the support of these key individuals, participants found the time to reconnect with friends, read, vacation, and exercise.

Marital Strain

I think there are compromises to my marriage—massive compromises to my marriage—because of the lack of time. None of that is fun stuff. (Gwen)

When referring to trade-offs and tensions, a common theme repeatedly emphasized by respondents was the amount of marital strain experienced. Some attributed this to not having adequate time to devote to their relationships, and others blamed it on their partners’ resistance to appreciate their wives’ high-profile jobs.

In discussing the strain she experienced in her relationship, Brenda referenced how her multiple responsibilities left little time and energy to devote to her life partner:

If you have two children and [are] juggling a job, they are high stress. They require all from you both physically and emotionally. It gets better in many regards as [the children] get older because they can dress themselves and feed themselves and can do their own homework, but those first few years you are attending to each of those little details. You are doing what you need to do on the job and having a fulfilling partnership with your spouse is difficult.

Several interviewees also noted their partners’ insecurities about having professional wives raised tensions in their marriages. Laurel related that her husband simply did not like being in the shadow of her career. Her perspective was also unique because she was a vice president when she met him, so he knew of her career aspirations from the very beginning.
Interestingly, he chose to stay home with the children. Laurel explained how her husband reacted to her public lifestyle:

He has a grumpy side. I’ll come home from a long day exhausted, and he wants tons of attention. I simply don’t have the energy to tend to him. Now again, that’s not necessarily of just a president, but can be true of anybody. This is just life. It’s not different when you are a president except for the difference is the public life. When we go anywhere, [our town] is sort of a small town with you know, people are lining up to talk with me. It’s been very awkward for him. They will ask him what he does and he will say, “Well, I’m a stay-at-home dad.” Well, the men in the south just about fall over dead. Of course, in [our previous community] there were four on our street but you know here, it is just a real novelty. That has been real awkward for him. Then he gets wounded and when we get back in the car, instead of enjoying the event, I have to tend to his ego and take care of him. Sometimes I have the energy for that, and sometimes I don’t.

Overall, one of the commonly verbalized tensions that resulted from managing their roles as parents and administrators was the strain that resulted on many participants’ marriages. They admitted to paying less attention to their partners because of limited time and energy. The demands of their children seemed immediate, and work expectations had deadlines. Caring for their partners and themselves seemed less of a priority.

Some participants were cognizant of the strain on their relationships. To combat this strain they openly communicated their concerns with their partners, sought marital counseling, spent purposeful time together, and made each other more of a priority in their lives. Michelle reinforced this idea:

The best thing I can do for my children is to love their father. Failing at my marriage is not an option, for me or for them. I lost sight of that for awhile when the kids were little and demanded so much time. We both recognized that we were growing apart and now work very hard to make our relationship a priority. After all, the kids will move out at some point. We need to make sure our relationship is more than about coparenting them.

Other strategies employed by the participants to lessen marital strain included spending an hour together each night after the children went to bed, talking during the day via phone or e-mail, regular adult outings
or dates, exercising together, taking adult vacations, and pursuing similar interests.

**Missing Out**

Missing out was another theme that emerged when study participants discussed the tensions in their lives. Although they enjoyed their careers and preferred to work versus stay at home, they worried about missing out on their children’s lives. They were concerned about not spending enough time with their children, fearful that they would grow up quickly and they would feel like they missed out.

Hillary voiced this theme in her interview. With her children almost grown, she reflected:

> There are times when I realize that some of my children’s earliest days are kind of a blur, not because I wasn’t there but because I was doing so many things. I look at these pictures of when they were small, and it just goes so fast. I’ll show you this picture because it seems like just yesterday. This was the day I got my doctorate. I was in my gown and [my daughter] wanted to be in a gown too. Of course, I had to get one for her. She’s 4 and he’s 8. It seems like just yesterday. [Hillary started to cry.]

**Feeling Guilty**

The tension is in my mind a lot of times. I don’t feel like I’m doing anybody any good. I feel like I’m doing the best I can at both places, but I don’t feel like it’s good enough at either place. I feel like [if] I’m doing better at either place, it would probably be at home. I feel like I could do so much more at work, but I’m just too tired. It frustrates me. (Lisa)

For most women in this study, the biggest trade-off they experienced as a result of being both a mother and a senior-level administrator was the emotional toll it took on them in the form of guilt. These women frequently shared their apprehensions about not spending enough time with their children or not dedicating themselves fully to their careers. As the amount of time in each day was limited, women felt conflicted about not giving 100 percent of themselves to either work or home, which often led to feelings of guilt.
The vast majority of women interviewed felt guilty about work and home, especially about not spending enough time with their children. Helen related that she often “suffer[ed] the guilt of always feeling like “I am giving someone my second best. You’ll feel like you have done nothing or that you haven’t done enough for your kids.”

Likewise, Leslie shared a story about the extreme guilt she felt about having someone else spend more time with her children than she did—a realization she reached when she learned that her nanny was teaching her young daughters new things:

It brings me down a lot. I get depressed about the kids. More so recently because my older daughter is learning so much. I came home one day to feed her dinner, and the nanny left. I’m feeding the baby, and she picked up her cup and started drinking milk out of it. I just cried the rest of the night. I had said, “Let’s try it and see if you can use the sippy cup.” She just picked it up and I said, “You’ve done this before.” I just balled the rest of the night. Everything changed after that. I’m going to get teary now. Everything changed after that because I knew that she wasn’t just learning from me. She says new words when I come home, and I know that I didn’t teach her.

The next form of guilt that the interviewees talked about was the remorse they felt about not giving themselves fully to their work. Connie started by sharing the guilt she placed on herself to be a good administrator. Her personality as a perfectionist, her desire to be a good administrator, and her insecurities about not spending enough time with her daughter fueled her guilt:

I feel very conflicted to tell you the truth. My problem is that I cannot do a mediocre job. I have this expectation that my job is very important and that I have to do it to perfection. If I delegate—and I do delegate a lot—I have to supervise sooner or later.

The respondents offered a variety of suggestions for overcoming the guilt that they felt regarding inadequately dedicating themselves to their children and to their careers. First, they recommended realizing that one was experiencing guilt and then learning to manage the feelings of anxiety. Next, these women advised that working mothers were present for their children more than they realized. Therefore, they should not feel guilty about not making them more of a priority. Hope, who had children ranging in age from 4 to 25, offered her explanation of this strategy:
Probably I could have spent more time with the kids, and I say that as part of the guilt as a parent. On the other hand, I really have been pretty involved. My oldest daughter is 25, and she constantly says that to me. That it amazes her as she looks back, how I was able to be at all her plays and all her concerts. I went anyway, and I supported her and [my son] too. I was there as much as many other parents who stayed at home. So yeah, maybe I could have volunteered more in school, could have done some of those things, but at the same time I say that I did do a lot of that.

Also, women in this study became more confident about their decisions to work when they saw their children grow into mature young adults. Much of the guilt these women felt about their children stemmed from their concerns that being a working mother would somehow jeopardize their children’s successes. Women agreed that most of their guilt about their children dwindled when they saw their children “turning out” okay. As their children grew up, they saw confident, well-behaved, intelligent, and interesting people. Knowing that they raised positive members of society made them feel better about their decisions to work. Karen shared:

I’m trying very hard to not to [feel guilty], and I think I’m getting so much better. I think one of the reasons I’m getting so much better is my kids are turning out well. I think I felt much guiltier when they were babies because I didn’t know if I could be doing permanent damage. Both of my girls have been identified by their teachers to go into the gifted program in their school system. In sitting down with their teachers and counselors and the principal of their school . . . it was very rewarding for me to hear that they were well adjusted. They were leaders in their classrooms. They get along well. Obviously they are good students, hard working, and well mannered. That’s the type of thing that you want to hear as a parent. . . . That for me was very rewarding. For professionals to say that my kids are good kids, creative, like school, and bright. It makes me feel good to know that along the way I made some of the right choices.

Next, women in this study talked about developing professional confidence in order to overcome the guilt surrounding their careers and their abilities to give fully to their professions. When Helen recognized that she was good at what she did, she was a valued employee, and not in jeopardy of losing her job, the guilt somewhat subsided:
Some of it is confidence that you are good at what you do. I think one of the primary reasons that I always felt guilty is because I never really knew until I had some outside signals that I was doing a worthwhile job. You get promoted. You get raises. You get performance appraisals. Then you realize, “They like me.” I have to credit this to my husband because he always says, “You know your competency but you don’t know your worth. You understand that you are good at your job. You know you are smart. You know that you are competent, but you have no idea what you are worth.” He said, “I think that women, especially women who are moms, have a difficult time understanding anything other than their competency.” I thought that was very interesting. I think that understanding that I am more than competent has helped me eventually understand and deal with the guilt.

With this confidence, Helen no longer felt guilty about taking time away from work to be with the children. She explained:

I think the second thing is that you start to see that your children are getting older. I’m recognizing that I have a limited amount of time with them. Work is no longer as important. “Darn it, you can fire me if you want but I’m going to the soccer game.” I think you develop some feeling that this is a time-sensitive option that you have and that you aren’t going to lose it.

The trade-offs, tensions, or compromises described in this section centered around three themes. The first detailed the many professional compromises women experienced because of the complications of managing career and family. They found themselves selectively choosing their professional positions based on the needs of their families, foregoing their schooling, and limiting their involvement in professional organizations. Second, these women also discussed the many personal sacrifices that resulted from their complicated lives. These included little to no personal time, lack of sleep and energy, marital strain, and “missing out.” Last, participants candidly described the guilt they often experienced for not spending more time with their children and not dedicating themselves as fully as they would have liked at work. Some of this guilt was alleviated when these women recognized that their children were “turning out well” and that they were, indeed, good at what they did professionally.
The Benefits

Despite whatever frustrations they felt as working mothers, the women in this study repeatedly reinforced that the benefits and rewards of their dual roles far outweighed any and all trade-offs associated with it. Interviewees often were eager to share their perspectives on the many positive aspects that accompanied being a mother and a senior-level college or university administrator. In this section, participants voiced the personal and professional advantages and benefits to their children as key “rewards” of working motherhood.

Personal Benefits

Participants shed light on the personal benefits associated with being a mother and a professional. These included satisfying incomes, enriching lives, and gratification that came with making others proud. First, although greatly downplayed, women discussed the material benefits they received from working. These included increased income, which enabled them to provide more material goods, after-school activities, and in some cases private education for their children. Megan shared her perspective on having an additional income: “Obviously, materially, we can afford to have her in band and piano lessons that we may not [otherwise have been] able to provide. That’s not the most important thing, but it does help.”

Interviewees also said that being a professional and a parent made their lives better, more enriched. Most refuted the stereotype that if given a choice all women would stay at home and raise their children and, in so doing, increased others’ awareness of the personal and professional satisfaction mothers can receive through their roles as mothers and professionals. They admitted that the rewards they received from both roles were extensive and that they genuinely enjoyed both aspects of their lives. Many detailed the pleasures and joys they received from being a mother. They agreed that being a mother provided them with a richness in their lives that they never imagined possible. As Gwen put it:

Here’s my little secret. I think that nothing in life compares to [having kids]. It’s not to minimize the importance of the work that we do, but because I think having children does put things in perspective and help you develop priorities. The trade-offs are, given that I have not won the lottery, I can’t imagine a better life. Not everyone has this gift of children. I do. They are so funny. They are so silly. They are so sweet. I am witness to that every day. I am the beneficiary of their love.
Having children also helped these women prioritize what was important in their lives. Many claimed that children gave them perspective, helping them to see that their lives were, in their view, more than just their careers. Reflecting back on a difficult workday this past Halloween, Laurel found joy in coming home to her children:

I can be at work and be real frustrated and [then] go home. Last night [I saw my daughter] in her Josie Pussy Cat outfit and [I] just melted. I never thought about work again while we were handing out Halloween candy. [My son] has an outfit that bleeds. Little boys love to bleed. It was just gross, but he’s so cute. I just have this really rich life besides a career. I have this really rich home life. I love these people, and they love me. We watch movies and pop popcorn and giggle and laugh, and I just have a whole other world. When I was single it was hard to get away from it mentally. When I go home now, I am pretty much focused on little freckles.

One final personal reward participants mentioned was the satisfaction they took in “making others proud.” Hearing their children, spouses, or their families talk about their successes was particularly gratifying for these women. Many expressed the joy they received from knowing that their children were proud of them.

Sharon, for instance, shared this anecdote about her son:

I do remember some conversations with [my son] early on, in fact. One day, he was maybe 5 years old and my husband said to him, “Who do you think is smarter: your mother or your father?” My husband is thinking he’s going to say him and he said, “Mom.” My husband almost fell off the chair. When he asked him why he said that, my son responded, “Because mom is a teacher. Teachers are smart.” I just smiled.

The personal rewards accompanied with being a mother and a professional were immeasurable for the women in this study. While they mentioned the benefits of having more money, they became more passionate as they discussed how their lives were more enriching and satisfying because of working motherhood. As many commented, these personal benefits far outweighed any of the downsides that accompanied assuming both roles.
Professional Benefits

Participants also discussed the professional benefits of being both a mother and an administrator. They shared how being a professional allowed them to have a positive impact on society by helping others. As a result, they had high levels of job satisfaction that positively affected their personal lives. Megan captured this sentiment as well as anyone when she said, “I think I’m a better parent because if I didn’t have [a professional] sense of achievement I would just be unhappy and I wouldn’t be as good of a parent because I would be an unhappy person. You have to be a happy person to be a good parent.” Interestingly, the benefits went the other direction as well. These women likewise noted how being a mother made them better administrators, often by helping them to become more approachable, better organized, and more compassionate.

First, from a professional perspective, many spoke about their love for their careers. They appreciated the opportunity to have a positive impact on others, especially on students. Hope commented:

I have such close contact with students and a lot of those students have graduated. To know that you were there to help them graduate is very rewarding. I know that I made a difference in their lives. That’s been really rewarding to be so personally involved. Aside from being proud of my family, I think it is real important that we all have something that we are proud of that has nothing to do with being a wife and a mother. I can look back on my career and my life and say, “You know, I really did some meaningful things. I helped some neat people. I met some neat people, and I feel good about who I am because of those things that happened.” That’s important to me.

Next, participants shared how being a mother made them better professionals. Many said that in their roles as mothers, they learned about compassion and understanding. These skills were useful in their work settings, particularly when managing people and working with students, in large measure because having children helped them to understand the needs of others and increased their sensitivity to the individual obligations of those with whom they interacted.

Hillary, for example, shared this story about how being a mother helped her to understand and interact more effectively with others:

Because I am also a mother, I think that I am a better dean. I’ll give you an example from today. I get to work at 7:30. I drop my daughter
off at her school and then I come here. So I am here at 7:30. There were two police cars in front of the building. I came in and there was a student who had nothing on except boxer shorts. An 18-year-old freshman student who was drunk found his way into the building and spent part of the night here. My son is 20 . . . [and this student also felt] like my son in the sense that I had such compassion. Here’s a kid who is drunk and needs some support. Another one of my employees was very afraid. In a way, again, because of my mothering skills, I could also understand her fear. I have had an incredible education that has prepared me to plan quality programs, but I think that my experience as a mother enables me to interact with different kinds of employees, students, clients, and nonclients.

Interviewees also pointed out that motherhood helped them to become more sensitive to the individual needs of their colleagues. In Brenda’s case, she believed she was more empathetic with those who worked with her:

I think to be an effective administrator you have to be compassionate, understanding, and sensitive to employees. It is very important. Each person who works with you has her own story. The more that you’ve experienced in your own personal life, the more you are able to understand. I have to be flexible. When I am understanding and empathetic and flexible with their family needs and with them, they will work that much harder when those concerns aren’t there.

Finally, when asked about the benefits of being a professional and a parent, many women spoke enthusiastically about how their working had benefited their children. From their vantage points, their lives as university administrators had not only exposed their children to enriching opportunities commonly found on college and university campuses, but it had also provided them with powerful role models.

Several interviewees discussed how working in a university setting provided their children with rich opportunities for growth—opportunities, many believed, that their children otherwise might not have experienced. For example, Rose explained how her son was introduced to greater diversity because of their life on campus:

My job has benefited [my son]. I think he has a wider view of the world. He lives in an environment that is very diverse. He’s very comfortable with people who don’t speak and don’t hear, people in wheelchairs, persons of color, people who speak languages other than English, just
because of the environment that we live in. I think that’s been the biggest benefit from my perspective.

With similar enthusiasm, Connie shared how her career in academia has influenced her daughter and exposed her to travel outside of the United States:

I have found that my [daughter] is very familiar with the rhythm of the semester. Her vocabulary includes words like *semester, tenure, faculty, Dr. so and so, history,* [and] *anthropology.* The university has been her world. I think my working has added to the richness of her life, her intellectual life, her relationships, and her educational development. She has been to Europe since we teach there in the summer. She’s 8. She's been to Europe maybe seven times.

Besides providing their children with enriching opportunities, many interviewees believed that their lives as working mothers have had a positive influence on their children’s futures as parents, professionals, and members of society. As Hillary put it:

Frankly, I think my children will be better professionals and parents given what they have been through. I think that my son will be a better father. Both, by the way, want to have children. They also want to have real careers, not just jobs. So that to me suggests an endorsement of my life. They get it, and they in some ways want to emulate it.

Interviewees cited many rewards that resulted from their lives as professionals and parents. They described the personal and professional benefits as well as the rewards that their working had on their children. Many appreciated how having children had helped them to establish priorities and gave them a life outside of work. Additionally, they felt that being mothers made them better professionals by helping them to become more compassionate and sensitive to the needs of others. Finally, they appreciated how their children had benefited from their working. All of these rewards, they believed, made working motherhood satisfying and worthwhile.

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

In this paper the advantages and disadvantages of being both a mother and a senior-level administrator were presented. A number of key
conclusions regarding the management of work and family may be drawn from the data. Additionally, these conclusions have potential to inform policy and practice. First, the participants all had passionate commitments to work and family. While they each offered testimony that combining a career with children was challenging, their success paved the way for future generations of college and university administrators.

Throughout the course of this investigation, a common denominator was underscored time and time again: The women in this study were among the first to negotiate the work-family dance within senior administrative ranks in colleges and universities. They chose to assume these multiple roles not completely knowing what was in store for them. With few mentors or role models who had previously challenged maternity leave policies, questioned the need for work-family benefits, or expressed frustration with the current status quo, these tasks fell on the shoulders of these trendsetters. As such, these women helped both to start a dialogue on work-family issues in colleges and universities.

The first step toward improving conditions for women administrators is to increase the awareness of the realities associated with managing a career and children. One way to better understand the multiple demands placed on those who manage work and family is by learning from them. Gaining insights, via a directed campus dialogue, offers one promising avenue for understanding more fully how women’s needs have been met in the past, and how higher education might better address those needs in the future.

Additionally the need for mentors is apparent. It is imperative women, similar to those in this study, become more proactive in serving as mentors to others. Many professional associations facilitate mentoring programs. It is essential that these organizations work to incorporate administrative mothers as mentors.

A second major finding from this study was that women had great passion for both their families and their careers. While they loved their children a great deal and recognized the downsides of managing both roles, most admitted that they could never be at home with their kids full time because they would miss the intellectual stimulation that work provided. Being a professional made them happy, and this personal satisfaction carried over into their family lives. That said, although these women loved their careers, all clearly stated that if managing a career and a family ever got too complicated, or if in some way they felt like their professional lives were somehow jeopardizing their children, they would quit.
Understanding working mothers' commitments to home and work is essential, especially for supervisors. Supportive supervisors play key roles in the successful management of work and family and the controlling of guilt toward home and work. It is recommended that supervisors empathize with working parents by allowing them the flexibility to occasionally leave work early to attend a child's event or infrequently stay at home to care for a sick child. Supportive supervisors avoid scheduling meetings in the early morning or late in the afternoon in an effort to not conflict with childcare arrangements. They may also offer alternative employment options such as 4-day workweeks, 10-month contracts, and possible part-time work. Those who are able to recognize the multiple demands of working parents are more likely to retain them. As this finding indicates, if the work environment is not supportive and conflicts too much with personal commitments, colleges and universities will lose these valuable and highly trained employees.

Third, each of the 17 women in this study offered persuasive testimony that although their lives as professionals and mothers were complicated and did not come without sacrifice, managing fulfilled lives as senior-level administrators and parents “could be done.” To be sure, interviewees candidly shared that their professional success was accompanied by personal and professional sacrifices. Despite the multiple trades-offs from their dual roles, these women were professionally successful and personally satisfied. Their stories not only exemplified the hard work, dedication, passion, and commitment required to be a mother and a senior-level administrator; but they also embodied the many rewards that accompanied both roles. Participants underscored that if a woman aspired to be a senior-level administrator and have children, it could be done and done well. They took pride in being role models for others as proof that women could have successful careers and children and love having both.

Although this is a meaningful message, finding participants for this study was no easy task. When contacting postsecondary institutions, more times than not I was told that no one at the institution met the criteria for the study, meaning either there were no women in senior-level management positions or none had children. Assuming then that these success stories are rare, it is even more important for women to know that indeed there are women in senior administrative leadership positions in colleges and universities who also have children. While the finding that “it can be done” may seem overly optimistic, it is an important statement to make to aspiring women. While they need to know the realities of these dual roles
and the pros and cons of assuming both, they also need the inspiration of knowing that while it may not be easy, “it can be done.”

Related to the finding that “it can be done,” this study reveals implications for women who aspire to senior-level positions and want children. First, women must make their personal needs and interests priorities in their lives. By prioritizing their personal needs, women will better sustain their busy schedules and levels of happiness. Second, administrative mothers must understand their professional and personal competencies. Knowing that they are valued, productive employees and good mothers is the first step toward elevating the guilt often felt by working moms. Another way to possibly lessen the guilt at home is to focus attention at home, when home. When physically home, working mothers should focus on their children, partners, and needs of home; not check e-mail, read papers, or return telephone calls. This allows women to fully enjoy their families rather than be distracted with work. Last, administrative mothers should master the art of delegation and maximizing their time both at home and at work.

The next major finding that emerged from this study was a simple one: There was no one way to achieve personal and professional success, and no one way to manage it all. Time and time again, participants emphasized the uniqueness of their experiences. They did not have predetermined professional plans that they followed to achieve their professional successes. Similarly, they could not predict how having children would affect their lives. They learned how to manage their dual roles based on their own set of circumstances. Although there were commonalities among the data and general conclusions were drawn regarding the realities of managing multiple roles, all emphasized that in order to succeed, women needed to work within their own sets of conditions. They must understand themselves and their priorities, be aware of their support systems and their limitations, and recognize the demands of their professions coupled with the demands of their personal lives.

Next, while efforts have been made to improve the current conditions for working mothers, the culture of higher education remains somewhat unsupportive. Some of this is due to the professional culture of academe and some to the perceptions of society in general. In order to reverse these perceptions, there needs to be a raising of awareness within the profession, increased education that young women can have careers and families, the inclusion of men in the work-family conversation, and the ongoing education of employers that working mothers are valuable investments in the future success of their colleges and universities.
On the whole, the issues surrounding work and family must be more of a priority on college and university campuses and within the profession as a whole. With the increasing presence of women in administrative and faculty positions in academe, the need to develop a supportive culture accompanied by work-family benefits is likely to become a key recruitment and retention issue in the near future.

There are a variety of ways to make work-family a priority on college and university campuses. First, there needs to be an increased awareness of work-family issues and policies at all levels. These issues must be discussed at the departmental, school/college, and senior institutional levels. Second, work-family issues should be discussed proactively. Topics related to work and family, including dual-career hiring practices, should be clearly stated in employee handbooks and discussed during new employee orientation. Human resource professionals, at the very least, should be well versed in these policies to ensure that they can guide and accurately advise new employees about them. Third, benefits and policies related to parenthood should be routinely evaluated for their use and effectiveness. If certain benefits are not used, policy makers should investigate the potential causes for their underutilization.

In sum, senior administrators and policy makers may find this research useful in understanding the conditions for success that are important for these women and, in turn, work to design effective support and outreach systems within higher education to serve them. Once these understandings and systems are established, it is possible that women administrators with children may find themselves remaining in the profession longer and advancing more frequently to its senior levels.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This qualitative study focused on the life histories of 17 women who were senior-level college and university administrators and mothers of school-aged children. Although they experienced their share of hardships, trade-offs, and compromises, the women in this study emphasized that by believing in themselves and their abilities and embracing their love for their careers and families, they were able to successfully negotiate and enjoy their complex lives.

A major conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that there is no single path for achieving personal and professional success. When women learn of this research, they often ask, “How do women do it?
What’s the answer?” Findings from this study will not give women a set of commandments for managing motherhood and career; rather, they offer to women various examples of how others have managed the dual roles of professional and parent. For some readers, simply learning that it “can be done” may be more significant than understanding how women actually do this!

The women in this study did not follow a straight path. Many of them encountered various roadblocks and hurdles along the way. From these perspectives come shared insights or suggestions about how one might approach managing work and family. There is no set way to achieve success. There is no one way to define success. Participants agreed that based on individual circumstances, women who aspire to professional positions similar to theirs will find a way to make it all work.

REFERENCES


