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Reflections on Challenging Times¹

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Synopsis

As many academic mamas do, I waited until I was (almost) tenured to try to have my children. After a couple of miscarriages, I got pregnant with twins. Here I present both personal stories and tales of how colleagues were treated by their department and administration when they were pregnant. Some had administrative duties revoked, some were encouraged to engage in academic dishonesty in order to have maternity leave, and some were not eligible for any leave. I also provide suggestions of how others might handle these encounters better than we pregnant faculty did.

Background

After I finished graduate school, I decided I wanted children but was nervous to get pregnant while on the tenure track. There were so many horror stories of women who had babies before applying for tenure who were encouraged or forced to extend the tenure clock, or who were given extended tenure clocks because of maternity leave, and then held to higher standards than their male counterparts, and therefore denied tenure.

When I decided I was close enough to tenure at my then-institution, a medium-sized regional state university, I started actively trying to get pregnant. After two miscarriages, I was finally pregnant — with twins!

¹Thanks to the mathematical and academic mamas who have supported me at low and high points. Thanks especially to Nancy Baker, historian and academic mama, for her conversations about this article which shaped it strongly.

It was an exciting time, but I had watched what other soon-to-be mamas had experienced in my department and at other institutions (some similar to mine and some small liberal arts colleges) and so I was concerned.

When I was first hired at that university, the department was family-centered, and the department chair would sometimes take an afternoon off to attend school events for his children. The men in the department whose wives had children seemed to be well supported, but there were very few tenured women in the department, and few of child-bearing age. At the time of my hire, the department didn't have a historical record of how to deal with parental leave or a person's return to work after having a child.

I was not the first in that department to have children, and I had watched the battles others had fought. I somehow thought that my experiences would be different — and they were — but I doubt they were any better. Here is a list of things that happened to me or to people I know when they were pregnant on the tenure track, along with some advice that I wish had been given at the time. Take the pieces useful to you and discard the rest — each situation is different and requires different finesse.

For obvious reasons, no persons or departments are identified by name herein.

Leave Options

Women I knew were “invited” to take the entire semester off if they were due in the middle of a semester. The university provided the required six weeks of (unpaid if you ran out of sick-time) leave, but was not offering a gift here. Some universities have offered friends administrative leave to develop a course or to conduct an internal department study, but our school offered to allow us not to teach and to not pay us for it.

Our alternative was to use banked time (previous overloads that we were supposed to be able to use later to buy out a course) to reduce our teaching load. Pregnant faculty were told that this would allow them to come back slowly, to be less of a strain on the department, and to enable them to spend more time with their new baby. When it was brought up that our male counterparts were using this buy-out time to do research, the administration didn't seem to see this as a contradiction — we had the buy-out time and could use it to reduce our load. That's what it was there for. And, after all, we could do research while out with the newborn.

Faculty who had administrative duties were “asked” to step down from those duties. In fact, one faculty member was told, “You don’t know what it’s like to have a baby. My wife went back to work, and she would come home exhausted and cry because she had missed time with our new child. You won’t want to have to do the administrative tasks.” Therefore, administrative duties like coordinating faculty schedules were removed from her workload. This increased her teaching load, but she was “allowed” to use one of her buy-out courses to reduce it back to the level she had with previous administrative duties. This might, actually, have been a good solution, but the removal of administrative duties was permanent and not solely for the semester after the baby was born.

In my situation, with twins arriving, I was strongly urged to take maternity leave. While the six weeks leave would have been lovely, my twins were born during the summer, meaning my allowed six weeks were up before the fall semester began, and so I wasn’t really eligible for any maternity leave unless I took the semester off without pay. My twins spent twenty-seven days in the NICU. I was lucky that they were discharged late summer, so we still had time to adjust to having them home before the fall semester started. But if they had been born later or spent more time in the NICU, I would have been forced to choose between taking unpaid leave and trying to teach with them still in the hospital. These are very individual and very difficult choices.

Other Solutions to the “Leave Conundrum”

Some universities have policies for not only maternity but also paternity leave. Some universities offer an entire semester for leave, a blessing to anyone who has a baby. Some universities even extend maternity and paternity leave to adoptions! “Yay!” for these improvements, which are slowly coming.

Some schools allow you to take on an overload the semester before the baby is due, so that you can cover your annual teaching load but still have a lighter (or non-existent) teaching load the semester your baby is born. Some universities allow and encourage faculty to teach online courses, where the time obligations are more flexible than a face-to-face setting.

As mentioned above, some faculty are allowed to reduce their teaching load (sometimes to zero) by developing a new course or doing an administrative study of the department.

Using a Sabbatical Leave to Have a Baby

It has been suggested that sabbatical is the perfect time to have a baby — after all you have all of that time “off” and you can stay home with the baby as long as you need or want. In fact, colleagues who have been approved for sabbatical and then found out that they are pregnant have been told to use that time off as their maternity leave.

However, the bottom line for me, personally, is that no person having a baby should be asked to use leave in a way that her male counterparts are not. Therefore, it is completely inappropriate to have a woman use her buy-out time or her sabbatical as maternity leave.

After sabbatical, most institutions require a report of progress — an update of how you managed to carry out your sabbatical plan while on sabbatical. I know of one woman who was encouraged to take her sabbatical, use her time as maternity leave, and then just claim that she had made progress on her research plan, even though her plan was to move to another part of the country to do her research. In fact, her research plan would have taken her away from her doctors, her family, and the rest of her support network. When she turned down the sabbatical (she might have negotiated to delay it, but didn't know better at the time), her department chair told her that she could have submitted almost anything as a sabbatical report and it would have been fine. However, this would not have furthered her research program. Moreover this administrator was simply encouraging her to engage in academic dishonesty.

Advice

Even though everyone's context is different, here are some thoughts on what might apply to most situations.

When you go to talk to your administrators about leave, first speak with other women at your college or university (in your department and outside of it, if you can). Find out what they were able to negotiate, and advice from them about maneuvering through Human Resources. You can read the faculty handbook or HR policies, but reading them does not always indicate how they are implemented. Getting advice ahead of time helps.

When you meet with administrators, make sure that you have a written record of all conversations. Your notes will probably be helpful, but it will be more helpful if you write an email to your department chair, dean, provost, human resources representative, or other appropriate person recapping any conversations that occurred, including any oral commitments made. This gives you a written and time-stamped record, and allows them to correct any misunderstandings quickly. I left many conversations thinking, “Did my chair/dean/provost really just say that?” Writing things down as they are said also gives you a chance to think about an appropriate response. Too often I was caught trying to react quickly to an uncomfortable situation and didn’t respond with “No, since my male colleagues are not using their leave in this way, neither should I.”

Don’t feel like you have to make a decision immediately. If your department chair offers you a semester unpaid leave or a course reduction, you have the right to ask for details in writing and time to make a decision.

In retrospect

I went back to teaching the fall after my summer babies were born. I was lucky to only have one class that semester (with 150 students!), so I was able to not be on campus every day, and to not have to rush out of the house early every morning. Nonetheless, I remember being so tired that I asked the same student the same question two or three class periods in a row and didn’t realize it until he answered. I was so tired that I couldn’t remember how to open the door to my gas tank when I needed to fill up at the gas station. I was so tired that I cried when the babies wouldn’t sleep at night. But I managed to get through that semester, and every semester after was easier. Could I have taken the semester off? Not if I wanted a paycheck. Could I have been on sabbatical that semester? Not if I wanted to accomplish any of my sabbatical goals.

Would I hold it against a woman who took a semester unpaid leave so she could stay home with her new baby? No, of course not. The most important thing that we can do for each other is to share information, offer support, and lean on other math mamas when we need it so that we can make appropriate choices for ourselves and our family. We need to keep a judgement-free dialog open in our community of support as others navigate the waters after us.

More broadly, we need to come together as a community and support each other and the decisions other women make as they have children. Our generation must fight for structural change, because nothing in the academy will change if we don't. We are a community of math mamas and we are a powerful force.