

Penn State Department of Geography
Graduate New Child Policy: A proposal presented by Supporting Women in Geography (SWIG)

The tendency of women to “leak out” of the academic pipeline at rates disproportionate to men is a well documented trend (see for example: de Wet 2002; Mason 2004; 2002; van Anders 2004). Concern about this problem has received much needed attention from university administrators and academics, and task forces have been formed to generate solutions for women in faculty positions *who have already completed their Ph.D.s.*¹ The result has been the implementation of maternity and parental leave policies for faculty members. The standard argument has been that early tenure years coincide with women’s “biological clock” and women therefore either self-select off the tenure track, or do not achieve tenure because of their family commitments. However, women’s fertility, on average, begins to decline at age 32.² Meanwhile, the average PhD recipient is 34 years old (Yoest 2004). Therefore, childbearing years for women frequently overlap with time spent in graduate school. Thus, biology and age, coupled with career trajectory, result in a need for flexible parental leave policies for graduate students, not just for faculty. And yet, most colleges, including Penn State, do not have paid maternity or childbirth accommodation policies for graduate students (Wilson 2006).

Though the biological argument has merit, it is not the only rationale for implementing such a policy. At the same time that women are increasingly entering the academic workforce, men are increasingly becoming the primary care providers for their children. Additionally, as the pipeline analogy suggests, a student can “leak out” due to family commitments at any age. These changing dynamics, coupled with an appreciation for the diversity of family composition, create the need for a new way of addressing family life for graduate students.

Increasingly, leading research universities are adopting parental leave policies for graduate students that not only allow for a leave of absence, but also allow for a minimal interruption to the student’s graduate career by enabling students to maintain their full-time status and all of the benefits therein. MIT and Stanford were among the first schools to adopt a comprehensive maternity policy for graduate students, and other major research institutions have followed, including Rice, Princeton, CalTech, and in the Big 10, Ohio State.

While MIT and Stanford have only extended this policy to women who give birth, most schools that have recently implemented such policies have created “new child policies” which are applied whenever a new child is introduced to a household, either through birth or adoption. Such policies recognize the diversity of household compositions and distribution of household labor by allowing leave for domestic partners and birth and adoptive fathers. The creation of a policy that institutionalizes the protocol for graduate students when a new child enters the household is an opportunity to promote the success of women in the program, as well as acknowledge the role that men increasingly play in childcare.

The New Child Policy proposed here fulfills the diversity goals of the 2005-2008 College of Earth and Mineral Sciences Strategic Plan as well as the 2004-09 University Diversity Strategic Plan Goals.³ Though we believe domestic partners and biological fathers should be granted the full amount of time allowed to birth mothers and adoptive parents, we are proposing a policy that mirrors the Penn State University faculty policy in order to limit the burden placed on the department upon implementation.⁴ This policy is designed to establish minimum standards for accommodation for a new parent. It is expected that advisors, departmental faculty, and the administration will continue to work with students (as many already have) to further accommodate new parents depending on their particular circumstances.

¹ See for example: <http://www.harvardmagazine.com/on-line/050556.html>
http://web.princeton.edu/sites/DOF/publs/GTF_Report/GTF_AppnB_Sect7.pdf
<http://www.rice.edu/fondren/woodson/archives/rucow.html>
<http://www.marquette.edu/genderequity/introduction/index.html>
² <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/infertility/DS00310/DSECTION=4>
³ <http://www.ems.psu.edu/facstaff/EMSstrategicplan+320052008.pdf>
http://www.equity.psu.edu/framework/updates_04_09/pdf/EdEquity_04_09rev.pdf
⁴ <http://guru.psu.edu/policies/OHR/hrg18.html>

Policy Features

As such, we propose the adoption of a parental leave policy that:

- Addresses birth mothers, fathers, domestic partners and adoptive parents
- Allows students to maintain full time status and the benefits therein, including health insurance, satisfaction of visa requirements, and continued funding and stipend (where applicable)
- Allows students to retain their original funding agreement (either as a TA, RA, or fellow). This is only applicable to students who were funded before the introduction of a new child into the household
- Formalizes system for delaying academic milestones, such as candidacy exams and comprehensive exams

Policy Details

- Birth mothers and adoptive parents are allowed six weeks of leave *immediately* following the introduction of a new child into the household.
- Domestic partners and fathers are allowed two weeks of leave to be taken *within three months* of the introduction of a new child into the household.
- Should both parents be students within the department, adoptive parents will have eight weeks to split between them.
- All students entitled to leave are to continue to be funded at the same level as they were prior to taking leave. Teaching assistants and research assistants are to work out their responsibilities with the professor to whom they are assigned. Wherever possible, students anticipating taking leave should work with the department to obtain a teaching assistantship or research assistantship that can accommodate 2 to 6 weeks of leave (depending on the student's eligibility). Students sponsored by outside fellowships should work out the details with the sponsoring agency.
- All new parents will be allowed to delay academic milestones, such as candidacy exams and comprehensive exams, by one semester. These delays must be understood as the student's right under the new child policy, and must not be viewed by the department as a negative reflection on the student's progress through the program.
- When a new child is introduced to the household over the summer, academic milestones may be delayed by one semester. The amount of leave, and timeframe for taking the leave, remain the same. For example, if a student gives birth four weeks before the start of the semester, she is entitled to leave the first two weeks of the semester. Domestic partners and fathers are still permitted two weeks of leave to be taken within three months of the introduction of a new child into the household.
- Students that do not receive funding or assistantships through the department are still eligible for the milestone delays.
- Students may extend an unpaid leave of absence beyond 6 weeks, but may also lose full time status, health care, visas, etc.
- This policy will be evaluated and reassessed by the graduate program committee after the first three times it is utilized or 5 years after implementation, which ever comes first.

To compare this policy to other graduate parental leave policies, as well as Penn State's faculty leave policy, please see the attached table.

Funding Possibilities

Though we recognize that administrators are more familiar with funding options for such a policy, the following are some ideas for funding the policy that we have come up with. Options vary depending on the scope of the adopted policy.

Department Level

- Endowment fund from alumni
 - Targeting women and former SWIG members (SWIG can help/lead this effort)
- Voluntary request for start-up funds from department members
- Apply for start-up grants
 - AAUW Community Action Grant-
 - Promoting education and equity for women and girls
 - \$2,000-\$7,000 over one year
 - Deadline January 15th 2007
 - http://www.aauw.org/fga/fellowships_grants/community_action.cfm
- Add to the cost of a stipend
 - When applying for grants add some fixed amount that will be put in the fund

College Level

- Build a pooled fund within the College of EMS
 - Coincides with the stated long term strategic goals of the College (EMS, 2005):
 - “Goal 1: To create the most student-centered College in Penn State history.”
 - “Goal 2: To develop a diversity and a climate that will empower future generations of scholars.”
 - “Action Item 3: Take a proactive stance in ensuring a climate that is conducive to the success of all”
 - Likely easier to initiate than a campus-wide fund
 - Department of Geosciences has a rudimentary policy
 - Ask each Department to chip in each year
- Potential allies/resources in the College:
 - EMS Office of Diversity Enhancement Programs
 - Geosciences Department

Campus Level

- Build a pooled fund across the university
 - Coincides with 2004-09 Diversity Strategic Plan Goals (Office of Vice Provost, 2004):
 - Goal 2: Creating a welcoming campus climate
 - Goal 3: Recruiting and retaining diverse student body
- Potential allies/resources
 - Women’s Studies Graduate Organization
 - Women in Science and Engineering
 - College of Engineering Diversity Program
 - Graduate Students Association
 - Penn State Commission for Women

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