

BALANCING ACT

A Bad Reputation

Why are more and more graduate students turning away from careers at research universities?

By [MARY ANN MASON](#)

"I don't want to live your life." Faculty members who train graduate students hear that remark a lot these days. In a [major new study](#) of doctoral students' career goals, our research team received candid responses from more than 8,000 Ph.D. students in all disciplines at the University of California system. The news was not good.

We may be losing some of the most talented potential academics before they even arrive for a job interview. In the eyes of many doctoral students, the research university has a bad reputation — one of unrelenting work hours that allow little room for a satisfying family life.

This is a new generation caught in an old culture. The pool of graduate students is no longer dominated by young men with stay-at-home wives. Nearly half of our graduate students are women, and this generation wants a different kind of life — not one where the men work round the clock and the women take care of the home and children. Instead, these students envision dual-career families with both parents sharing in child raising.

Family balance weighs heavily on the minds of students in considering their career choices: 84 percent of women and 74 percent of men registered the family friendliness of their future workplace as a serious concern. But they do not see their own universities meeting that goal. More than 70 percent of women in the survey, and more than half of the men, *did not* consider research universities to be family friendly.

The number of young women who want to pursue careers in academic research declines by 30 percent over the course of their doctoral study, and the number of men by 20 percent. In explaining their decision, men are more likely to report that they do not like unrelenting work hours. One male student in the survey complained that he was "fed up with the narrow-mindedness of supposedly intelligent people who are largely workaholic and expect others to be so as well." But most women give up on academic-research careers for family concerns. As one woman in the survey said, "I could not have come to graduate school more motivated to be a research-oriented professor. Now I feel that can only be a career possibility if I am willing to sacrifice having children."

Women also change career paths to accommodate their partners. Among academic couples in which both partners are seeking tenure-track jobs — the much-debated "two body" problem — women are more likely to defer their career plans for the benefit of the relationship. As one female doctoral student explained, "To pursue a tenure-track job in English you need to be willing to move anywhere in the country to take the job. The salaries for these positions are not enough to justify a spouse giving up his job, and many of these positions are not in places where a spouse could easily find another job, especially if he is an academic."

Role models also make a difference. When we asked women in the survey whether they viewed research universities as family friendly, their opinions differed significantly depending on whether or not it was common in their departments for female professors to have children. Where it was common, 46 percent of female respondents agreed that research universities were family friendly. Where it was uncommon, only 12 percent of women agreed.

Not many babies are born in graduate school, even though more than two-thirds of the female respondents claimed that the optimal time to have a first child would be between the ages of 28 and 34 — the very years in which they are struggling to obtain their Ph.D.'s. The average age at which women receive a Ph.D. is 33, meaning that those lucky enough to find tenure-track jobs right out of graduate school cannot expect to earn tenure until they are 39. They can see their biological clocks running out before they achieve the golden ring of tenure, but they feel helpless.

Money is a major consideration for why women don't have children in graduate school. Few members of the Association of American Universities (the 62 top-ranked research universities) offer paid maternity leave to graduate students who are employees or supported on fellowships, and only a handful provide them with dependent health care for a child.

Women in our survey said they didn't have time in graduate school to have children, and they also feared that doing so would mean they would no longer be considered serious scholars by their professors. One student said of her department's attitude toward pregnant doctoral students: "There is a pervasive attitude that the female graduate student in question must now prove to the faculty that she is capable of completing her degree, even when prior to the pregnancy there were absolutely no doubts about her capabilities and ambition." The majority of women in the survey, as opposed to only 16 percent of the men, were somewhat or very concerned that pregnancy would be similarly perceived by future employers.

Academic science offers even more challenges for graduate-student parents, particularly mothers. The competitive race to achieve scientific breakthroughs and prove oneself offers little respite for childbirth or child rearing. The effect of parenthood on the career choices of female doctoral students supported by federal grants (the source of support for most students in the sciences) is undeniable. Forty-six percent of female respondents began their graduate studies working toward a faculty position in a research university.

Babies changed that; only 11 percent of new mothers indicate they now want to continue on that path. Fatherhood for men similarly situated appears to have less impact — 59 percent began their doctoral programs planning to pursue a research-intensive academic career and 45 percent still plan to do so.

Where do all the graduate students go when they reject careers at research institutions?

The biggest winners are business and government. Four-year teaching colleges are also a popular choice, since they are perceived as being the most family friendly of all career choices in higher education. That may surprise faculty members at four-year colleges who often complain of heavy teaching loads and lack of accommodations for pregnancy and child rearing.

Unless the old academic culture — which discourages family formation at all levels but is particularly unfriendly to graduate-student parenthood — radically changes, we are in danger of losing many of our best and brightest minds to other professions. There has been some movement to accommodate new faculty parents, but by then it is already too late to capture many disaffected graduate students who have already found careers elsewhere.

For starters, some of the policies now offered to many faculty members could be extended to doctoral students who are employees or supported on fellowships. Those include: paid maternity and paternity leave, paid dependent health insurance, subsidized child care, relief from teaching and work obligations for several weeks following childbirth and adoption, and stopping the Ph.D. career clock after childbirth for both mothers and fathers.

At present, too many graduate students agree with this woman's appraisal in our survey: "Don't get a Ph.D.! Just don't do it: There are so many other things in life that you could do for a living that are as intellectually challenging, pay more, and where women having children is not a big deal. Academia is stuck in the 1970s at best on this issue."

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