Work-life balance of academic parents: expectations and experiences of mothers and fathers

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Abstract

Purpose – This study was conducted to fill gaps in the literature based on institution type, career level, and gender identity.

Design/methodology/approach – Faculty often struggle with achieving work-life balance. This struggle is exacerbated for faculty parents. Most academic parent research has been conducted on early-career women and at research-intensive universities. Although these groups are important, it is also important to understand experiences of academic parents at different career levels and types of institutions. The authors conducted a qualitative thematic analysis from focus groups with faculty from a mid-sized master’s level university about work-life balance expectations and experiences in their roles as academics and parents. These four groups included early-career mothers (n = 5), early-career fathers (n = 4), mid-career mothers (n = 4), and mid-career fathers (n = 7).

Findings – Faculty expressed having a high workload based on an intersection of high work expectations, unclear work expectations, and lack of equity. Consequences of the high workload included lower work-life balance, dissatisfaction at not doing more, the loss of flexibility as an advantage, and lower organizational commitment.

Originality/value – Although results are limited in generalizability, it is useful to examine one institution, with all participants sharing the same culture and policies, in-depth. The authors discuss recommendations for educational administrators for assisting academic parents and suggest institutions work to examine informal expectations and formal policies at their institutions. Working together, faculty and staff can help enhance alignment of expectations and perceptions of work-life balance, hopefully leading to happier, more satisfied employees.

Keywords Faculty, Parenting, Work-life balance, Workload expectations

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Academia is often thought of as a great work environment for parents because of its high level of flexibility and autonomy. Unfortunately, this flexibility, coupled with modern digital connectivity, generally comes with the expectation that academics work long and/or odd hours (Gaio Santos and Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Misra et al., 2012). Being a faculty member means juggling multiple aspects of the job (Misra et al., 2012), a never-ending task list (Hardy et al., 2018), and no indication of when many tasks are complete, such as when a lecture is good enough (Halpern, 2008). This situation creates high levels of stress and burnout (Blix et al., 1994; Watts and Robertson, 2011), especially when combined with non-work stressors (Sabagh et al., 2018). Afful (2013) refers to an academic career as a “double-edged sword” (p. 96) because of this duality of flexibility and high stress.

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Lester (2015) claims that academia is built on the assumption that faculty “do not have significant family responsibilities that would take them away from work” (p. 141). These unrealistic expectations can be problematic. The combination of parenting and academic workload makes work-life balance extremely difficult to achieve as academic parents try to find nooks and crannies in their schedule to read an article, grade, or reply to a student’s email. Although it is possible for family and work to be mutually supportive, demands in the two realms are often incompatible and can lead to role strain or conflict (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985) and create a lack of work-life balance. The lack of balance can be even harder for academic mothers, given that research has found that women in Western societies tend to have more family responsibilities than men, even in dual career families (Clark and Hill, 2010; van Anders, 2004), and these obligations shift time allocation away from reported ideals (Afful, 2013). Most pre-tenure female faculty members are not satisfied with their work-life balance and, in many cases, achieving tenure does not create balance (Fothergill and Feltey, 2003). The Covid-19 pandemic had a profound impact on work-family life; of particular importance to academic parents is the widespread increase in remote work, or telecommuting (Yavorsky et al., 2021) combined with the expectation that workers are always available for online meetings (Madon and Lago, 2023). Research demonstrates that the pandemic increased childcare responsibilities for both mothers and fathers (Yavorsky et al., 2021). While some heterosexual couples reported more egalitarian divisions of labor (Carlson et al., 2022; Shockley et al., 2021), research consistently demonstrates that mothers still devoted more time to both housework and caregiving responsibilities (Carlson et al., 2022; Ruppanner et al., 2021). These role strains have been found to be exacerbated for female faculty during the pandemic in many academic fields, such as medicine (Matulevicius et al., 2021) and the sciences (Caldarulo et al., 2022).

Workplaces that emphasize psychological health, through aspects like employee empowerment and recognition and better work-life balance, have been found to have higher employee satisfaction, well-being, organizational commitment and lower turnover (Taylor et al., 2017). Research has found that high job demands lead to job strain and low job satisfaction, especially when combined with low empowerment (Karasek, 1979). In researching empowerment in tenured faculty, McNaughtan et al. (2022) listed five dimensions of faculty empowerment: self-efficacy, trust, meaning, personal consequence, and self-direction. These aspects of empowerment may be different for academic parents compared to academic non-parents. Self-efficacy, the belief in one’s ability to perform at a high level as a faculty member, may be decreased under high job demands and time-consuming parental responsibilities. Academic parents may have decreased trust amid concerns that they will lack support from administrators and colleagues in their role as a parent. Meaning, which refers to being intrinsically motivated, and personal consequence, which refers to caring about how their work affects outcomes, may also be lower for academic parents in times of high work and caregiver demands. Feelings of self-direction may also be lower for academic parents as they may feel a lack of choice in duties that need to be completed. Therefore, academic parents are at a risk of lower faculty empowerment from multiple directions.

Current study
The current study adds to the literature on the experiences of academic parents, because much of the research has focused on research intensive universities (R01; Clark and Hill, 2010; Lester, 2015). It is important to examine experiences of being an academic parent at master’s-level institutions, which generally require substantial research output along with a heavy teaching and service load (Clark and Hill, 2010). Clark and Hill (2010) compared expectations across one R01 university, three master’s comprehensive universities, and one liberal arts college. In tenure criteria, the R01 institution emphasized research with a three course per year load. The others had lower research expectations but did expect excellence in teaching, research, and service with a six to seven course per year load. In addition, the expectation of
securing some external funding is becoming common in many teaching-intensive universities (McClure and Anderson, 2020). Additionally, it is important to examine the experiences of academic parents at Minority Serving Institutions, such as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). Although they vary in many characteristics, such as Carnegie classification, HSIs often require high teaching loads and enroll students that would be classified as non-traditional, including first-generation status, socioeconomic status and financial independence, age, and employment status (Benitez and DeAro, 2004). Racially diverse students often face unique barriers and challenges to degree persistence, and, thus, HSIs need a reconceptualization of support services and a campus culture that leverages their unique experiences and strengths to enhance their academic success. A key to student success at HSIs is a positive campus climate, which requires faculty support and relationships to help connect students to the institution (Medina and Posadas, 2012). Meeting these needs may increase faculty workload, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, more research on varied institution types, such as non-R01s and HSIs, is needed to fully explore the impact of being an academic parent at institutions with different work expectations.

Other gaps in the literature also need to be addressed. Most research on academic parents has focused on early-career faculty. Given that perceptions of job factors can shift post-tenure (August and Waltman, 2004) and delays in having children are becoming more common (Hardy et al., 2018), there needs to be more research on academic parents later in their career. Recent research that was not focused on parental status found that work-life balance interference bothers experienced faculty more than junior faculty and impacts their job satisfaction and motivation (Demir and Budur, 2023), suggesting a need for more research on experienced faculty parents. Furthermore, research examining expectations for academic fathers is lacking, which is concerning since work-life balance issues also affect fathers. Men are a larger portion of faculty, and male faculty are more likely to have children (Sallee, 2013). More research is needed to understand the impact of an academic career on fathers as their roles evolve and many contribute significantly to childcare (Fothergill and Feltey, 2003; Williams et al., 2006).

We conducted the current study to help fill these gaps and learn more about the experiences of academic parents. We used focus groups with academic parents at a mid-sized master’s-level university that is designated as an HSI. Participants included early and mid-career mothers and fathers. Our research questions explored the work-life balance experiences, including feelings of empowerment, among academic parents. Based on our qualitative analysis, we make recommendations for administrators to improve the careers of academic parents.

**Methodology**

*Research design and context*

Because the current study was designed to serve as an in-depth examination of the experiences of academic parents at a master’s-level institution, qualitative data were collected rather than quantitative data (Anderson, 2010). Data were collected in focus groups, which typically consist of homogeneous individuals and encourage disclosure of experiences and attitudes through interviewing (Robinson, 1999). Following the principle of homogeneity recommended for focus groups (Carr et al., 2018), focus groups in the current study were created to ensure that individuals were of equal career status (i.e. early-career (pre-tenure and lecturer) and mid-career (tenured and senior lecturer)) and family role (i.e. mothers and fathers) so there were not any power imbalances among participants and to create an environment in which individuals would feel the most comfortable sharing their viewpoints. Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze, and interpret common themes in the data (Terry et al., 2017) and understand participants’ experiences and perspectives. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows for flexibility while also maintaining systematic procedures in qualitative data analysis.
Participants
Participants were from a public regional comprehensive university in a suburban area of a major city in Texas. The university is designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution and enrolls many students often labeled as non-traditional based on their first-generation status, age, or other characteristics. When data were gathered, there were approximately 9,000 students and approximately 300 full-time faculty. Students included baccalaureate, master’s, and limited practitioner-based doctoral programs. At the time of data collection, the university was listed as a M1: Master’s Colleges and Universities – Larger Programs on the Carnegie Classification (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2021).

An initial recruitment survey was sent to all faculty at the institution. The email provided a broad description of the study and asked full-time faculty who were parents to complete informed consent and a brief survey with demographic questions. Full-time faculty members who were parents and completed the survey were then invited to participate in focus groups. The four focus groups were conducted via Zoom: early-career mothers (n = 5, M.age = 40.4, SD.age = 6.0), early-career fathers (n = 4, M.age = 41.0, SD.age = 3.8), mid-career mothers (n = 4, M.age = 41.3, SD.age = 5.9), and mid-career fathers (n = 7, M.age = 45.4, SD.age = 3.8). In terms of numbers of children, nine participants had one child, seven had two children, three had three children, and one had four children. Two of the parents with one child were also expecting a second at the time of the focus group. Children ranged in age from four months to 16 years old. Participants were diverse in terms of race and ethnicity and academic specialties. To minimize concerns of anonymity, we are not reporting additional demographic statistics.

Data collection procedure
We received approval from our institution’s institutional review board (20–067) to collect data for this study. After informed consent, one researcher conducted semi-structured interviews in the four focus groups, which took place between October 16 and November 20, 2020. A second researcher attended most of the focus groups to observe and take notes. The questions were open-ended and encouraged participants to discuss their choice of institution, work-life balance, ability to meet expectations in personal and professional roles, sacrifices for personal and professional roles, institutional support or barriers to work-life balance, greatest challenges in personal and professional roles, and primary benefits of working at a teaching-focused institution (see Supplemental material focus group protocol).

Data analysis procedure
The focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai with editing to correct transcription errors. Five researchers read the transcripts independently and identified common themes they observed in the data. The researchers then met and discussed the themes identified between and within the focus groups relating to the research question. To maintain rigor, throughout the discussion of themes, the researchers took notes and addressed potential biases and knowledge about the topic. Two researchers then reviewed the transcripts to refine the initial themes identified by the research group. Additionally, a student researcher, who was naive to the purpose of the study, reviewed the transcripts to categorize data into themes and determine if there were any additional themes in the data. The researchers also examined the literature to determine how the themes identified in the data compared to those reported in other studies about working parents and parents in higher education.

Positionality statement
The authors report that they have no competing interests to declare. The authors are all academic parents, with 1–3 children under the age of 18, and all the authors have a co-parent residing in their home. When data analysis for the study was conducted, four authors were tenured and one was
tenure-track. The authors have been full-time faculty at their institution for 6–20 years. Four of the authors are women, three authors are White, one author is White and lives in a multi-ethnic household, and one author is Hispanic. The authors have backgrounds in psychology, sociology, and biology, and are all involved in faculty governance at their institution (e.g. Faculty Senate). None of the authors were participants in the study.

Limitations
Participants in the focus groups consisted of faculty at one institution, which may not be representative of the experiences of faculty at other teaching-focused institutions. In addition, some focus groups discussed topics that were tangential to the questions. While these types of discussions are common in focus groups, it may have limited the discussions of experiences and perspectives related to the purpose of the study.

Results
Participants were asked about work-life balance and expectations of work-life balance when they started the job, whether one can be a good parent and a good academic, whether being an academic or parent meant a sacrifice in one area or the other, how the institution hinders or supports work-life balance and the potential contradiction between flexibility and high stress. From responses, two main themes emerged: (1) high workload, and (2) negative effects of the high workload. Although faculty expected their work to be less stressful than at an R01, they still found a high workload caused by an intersection of three subthemes: high work expectations, unclear work expectations, and lack of equity in work expectations for academic parents.

Theme of high workload
A main element of high work expectations was the combination of a high teaching load and required research output. Faculty members across all four groups reported low levels of self-efficacy in terms of being able to meet expectations. Faculty anticipated the teaching load, but the research load was more than expected, especially given the resources provided. An early-career mother even stated that, when she was interviewed, she was told about the teaching focus but “almost immediately upon actually arriving on campus that changed to publish, publish, publish.” Both mothers and fathers commented on the research load saying, “the research standard is not consistent with the job [mid-career mother],” and “it’s a lot of teaching . . . you’re not allowed any time to do that research. When would you do that research? During your sleep? [early-career father].” Several faculty members also mentioned the support provided did not match the expected outcome or that they wished for more research support. One mid-career father felt “for what we’re given here, to start with, we do a pretty good job.”

Many faculty members stated they were expected to be excellent at teaching, research, and service. Sometimes this belief in being a good academic was placed by the university: “there’s no way I can ever be like 100% what our university wants and also what I want to be for my kids [mid-career mother].” Sometimes this belief was based on what they saw: “I feel like this is all around me about you have to do all these things 100% [mid-career mother],” and some faculty members were putting part of the blame on themselves, calling themselves workaholics. One early-career mother stated, “Because I feel as if that pressure is coming from the institution putting more pressure on us than they really should. And sometimes I feel that it’s me. I’m failing.”

In addition to the high work expectations, faculty felt work expectations were not clearly defined. Given the lack of clarity, faculty members often did not trust the administration to be fair and strategized that they had to do additional work to make sure they were doing what administrators expected. One way this belief manifested was through a “disconnect between what they [the university] say they value and what is actually valued [early-career mother].”

Work-life balance of academic parents
Faculty also wondered how the university expected faculty to have a work-life balance given the expected workload. One mid-career mother wondered if they would better understand expectations if they could “see these models where people have this work-life balance.” A mid-career father talking about research expectations and the purpose of research at a non-R01 stated:

> It feels like a hodgepodge because [you know one] administrator just wants lots of pubs, doesn’t matter what . . . and else we’ll talk grant dollars . . . and then every once in a while someone throws in “hey, I care about students being involved.”

Another mid-career mother mentioned unclear expectations for attendance at events that conflicted with parenting duties.

The third subtheme addressed a lack of equity in how academic parents were treated. Many female faculty inferred that to be a good academic, parenting should not interfere with their productivity. One mid-career mother stated, “Before I went out [for childbirth] like halfway through the semester . . . other faculty had to take over my classes. And I felt really guilty about that.” Several mothers mentioned lack of support combined with high feelings of personal consequence when pregnant or having to factor in their workload in terms of timing a pregnancy that led to undue pressure. Another mid-career mother stated, “I was working in the delivery room to try to make sure that I had everything completely squared away and freaking out about making sure that I didn’t put a burden on my other faculty members.” In this case, the faculty member’s feelings of personal consequence were so strong, she felt she had to complete a task even in the delivery room. Some academic parents did not even know how to plan their work for an arriving baby: “I spent so much time worrying about how would everything go [at work]? And like, who do I tell? And how do I tell? And like, will they be upset [mid-career mother].” Academic parents also believed they had to be continually producing even through busy parenting times, potentially demonstrating a decrease in personal choice and meaning. An early-career mother, who gave birth related that she “still felt that pressure [to constantly publish] . . . and it was frustrating to not have that understanding” from her department chair.

Theme of negative effects of high workload
The second theme about experiences with work-life balance was the negative effects produced by the high workload; including subthemes of lower work-life balance, dissatisfaction at not doing more, loss of flexibility as an advantage and lower organizational commitment.

Faculty members reported difficulty with work-life balance; their comments suggest that their feelings of self-efficacy were often low, due to competing demands from both work and family. For female faculty, this lack was felt even before the pandemic, that the “day never ends,” and “there’s not a real separation between work and life [mid-career mothers].” In fact, some mothers stated, although the pandemic had been challenging, it actually improved some aspects of work-life balance since their spouses were present more because of working from home or reduced travel. Fathers were more likely to report they were able to achieve balance before the pandemic but having the kids home during the pandemic made getting work done harder. An early-career father expressed, “it used to be that I could guard time on the weekends where I wasn’t doing work. And that could just be family time, or frankly, me time. And I don’t have that anymore . . . so I think right now I just feel like I’m going from fire to fire to fire.” Parents of both genders mentioned having to bring in family or paid help to be able to keep up with the workload during the pandemic. This lower work-life balance often led to a dissatisfaction of oneself for not doing more, illustrating a decrease in self-efficacy. One early-career mother summed up her situation stating, “I’m not there enough for my students and I’m not there enough for my children.” One problem faculty members mentioned was the belief that one could always be better if one did just a bit more. An early-career father stated: “I’d like to think I’m doing good at all the things I’m
Faculty members also expressed that job flexibility was no longer a benefit. Faculty members often anticipated flexibility on when to work, but it disappeared when the workload required working all the time, particularly during the pandemic. In other words, they lost an element of personal choice. The flexibility often meant that they were the parent “on call” during the day which forced them to work other times. One mid-career father stated, “Because we have the ability to be flexible, we have a responsibility to be flexible, and that means things intrude,” and an early-career mother mentioned, “it is that double-edged sword having that flexibility . . . .it’s hard for my husband not to say ‘oh hey can you take the car and get the oil change today . . . .can’t you grade papers . . . while you’re getting an oil change.’” Being flexible also fell on some of the fathers, although others mentioned their spouses making sacrifices, such as dropping classes or changing careers. One mid-career father noted his wife “doesn’t have really any time to help with the schoolwork or anything like that. So really all of that is kind of falling on me. So, I have the flexible job. So, I’m the one who usually gets stuck with all of the other parenting things,” and another mid-career father stated he would have to work after his wife came home: “I have to go grade papers and you’re [my spouse is] like I haven’t even seen you today I want to spend some time with you. It’s like yeah that’s great you had all day at work.”

The final subtheme related to a decrease in organizational commitment. Oftentimes, faculty blamed the university, and many faculty did not trust the institution to care and be pro-active about their well-being. An early-career father expressed, “I think there is sort of passive support for having a work-life balance or like having a family but not necessarily intentional or active support.” A mid-career mother agreed stating, “it’s really not something they’re concerned with,” and a second mid-career mother expressed, “I just don’t think it’s on anybody’s radar, except for faculty.” In a separate group, a participant similarly expressed, “I don’t blame it from an institutional perspective, but in some cases you feel like institutions should be more supportive [mid-career father].” To counter this problem, one early-career mother thought administration needs “to promote the idea that you do not need to be working all the time.” Another participant stated that the “university can do a lot more to more clearly articulate what those expectations really are [early-career father].”

Faculty across groups felt a lack of trust with the university, as illustrated by the rumors faculty heard, “I had heard horror stories or warnings about telling upper administration about my pregnancy [early-career mother],” along with colleagues’ experiences, “a colleague who also tried to stop his tenure clock because of a birth” and heard it was “very difficult for him to convince the dean [early-career mother].” This lack of trust seemed to be centered upon upper-administration, as many faculty did mention that “everybody on my level ... was very welcoming and supportive [early-career mother].” This support contrasted with the support felt institutionally as some mentioned they felt “added stress because of an unwelcoming feeling or culture from administration/HR [early-career mother].”

Although both mothers and fathers reported feeling unsupported, mothers seemed to feel this lack of support more acutely. One mid-career mother related that when she arrived, her program coordinator “said I just want to tell you now don’t have kids until after tenure, and I was really offended by that ... it was the very first thing she said to me.” Another early-career mother stated, “I actually had to fight to get to stop my tenure clock, I had to prove to him [the dean] that it was needed.” Another example from a mid-career mother related, “I had told my chair ... that I would be on leave the semester I expected to give birth. And then I had a second trimester miscarriage. And it was like ... I had like caused the biggest inconvenience in the world.”

This lack of trust with the university impacted both faculty member’s commitment and the meaning they ascribed to their work as an academic. Some faculty wondered about their commitment to the university. “I constantly wonder why are we pushing ourselves so hard if we’re not really being rewarded? [mid-career father].” Other faculty expressed more negative
attitudes toward the university. A mid-career mother stated, “they [the university] can’t have it [time] all. I won’t, I won’t give it to ‘em,” and a mid-career father stated, “The university priorities have to be clear in some way that will give us a confidence that our work is appreciated, and you know we are valued.” One of the more distressing notes was a change in the tone of the relationship with the university. A mid-career mother stated, “I’m not gonna give this university more than it gives me.” Another mid-career mother prioritized her duties as to her kids, to herself and then the university, which gets the “scraps.”

**Discussion and recommendations**

**Discussion of study findings**

Both academic fathers and mothers reported experiencing increasing or unclear expectations, creating challenges in achieving work-life balance or even balance within the various aspects of being an academic. These tensions led to negative effects, including dissatisfaction with work productivity and lower organizational commitment. However, there were also some differences, with mothers expressing more difficulty maintaining productivity due to their experienced role strain (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). In some ways, the pandemic acted as an equalizer in increasing workload and disrupting work-life balance for fathers.

In addition to not being able to achieve work-life balance, academic parents reported their expectations did not align with the institution’s, which was exacerbated by a lack of feeling empowered, a combination problematic for job satisfaction and productivity (Johnsrud, 2002; Taylor *et al.*, 2017; Williams *et al.*, 2006). Faculty also struggled because of spillover from one role to another (Sweet, 2014), which can be beneficial when flexibility is needed, but also can increase conflict and make disengagement from a role more difficult. Sweet states that, “Ultimately the goal is to foster synergistic conditions in which the organization of work and family roles strengthens both institutions” (p. 48).

Ideally, academia can lead the way in being family-friendly and embracing a culture that allows all individuals to thrive at work and have a full life, which may require challenging unexamined bias and traditional gender role stereotypes (Gaio Santos and Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Williams *et al.*, 2006). It is imperative that academic institutions work to improve faculty empowerment and work-life balance (Williams *et al.*, 2006), as it predicts or mediates many positive outcomes, including work performance (e.g. Berglund *et al.*, 2021) and well-being (Rosa, 2022). Unfortunately, the culture of many institutions is seen as not supportive to work-life balance and can create a culture of excessively high expectations and stress levels, leading to frustrations and attrition.

**Policy recommendations**

Based on our data, we provide four areas of recommendation for university administrators to support faculty with meeting the challenges of being an academic parent: (1) communication about work expectations, (2) policies and procedures relating to academic parents, (3) resources for academic parents and (4) training for academic leaders on issues related to academic parenting. Each of the four areas are based on challenges stated in the focus groups. Addressing these areas may provide caregivers with higher levels of empowerment through increased self-efficacy, personal consequence and self-direction (McNaughtan *et al.*, 2022).

Based on our focus groups, it is evident that communication and transparency between administration and faculty is crucial. Expectations were not aligned between the faculty members and the institution. Improving alignment can enhance dimensions of empowerment, such as self-efficacy, trust, and outcomes, such as achievement and retention (Johnsrud, 2002). To make alignment more likely, requirements to be successful should be clear, and achievable with available resources (Lawrence *et al.*, 2014) so that faculty are more likely to be successful. Furthermore, it is essential that faculty perceive empowerment and appropriate rewards, along
with feeling valued and appreciated, when asked to do substantial work (Taylor et al., 2017). Finally, it is recommended faculty are empowered to work with administration to create appropriate workload expectations for career advancement for academic parents.

As an example of a success story, the studied institution’s recent promotion and tenure policy revisions for clarity have already been impactful. These revisions led to higher feelings of self-efficacy for faculty members, and likely higher levels of trust. One early-career mother mentioned, “But now concretely having something [tenure guidelines] on paper to kind of help myself say okay, I’m kind of moving along and . . . It’s the weekend, I’m going to shut down and turn it off.” Furthermore, the institution has recently developed and passed a workload policy to add even more clarity and to acknowledge variance in teaching loads.

Universities should have clear policies, procedure, and promotion and tenure guidelines regarding workload during pregnancy, delivery, and having a new baby; adoptions or foster care of children; sick leave for relatives; how any long-term absences from work affect annual reviews; and pausing the tenure clock, including addressing the financial impact of delaying promotions (Manchester et al., 2013). These types of policies, procedures, and guidelines should then minimize the distrust faculty feel about the institution and lead to fewer rumors about faculty being unsupported while navigating caregiving responsibilities, including pregnancy. Faculty should not be penalized for long-term absences or pausing the tenure clock. Additionally, institutions may want to consider having policy expectations related to campus events outside of standard work hours given that these events would interrupt family time. Such a policy would be difficult for a university that includes many non-traditional students, such as the one examined, but perhaps non-business hours could be minimized, the institution could provide clearer expectations about attending these events, and/or the institution could provide childcare support.

Institutions can also develop resources for academic parents, including mentoring programs and childcare, which should enhance faculty’s levels of self-efficacy. Several faculty members mentioned the lack of childcare on campus, but others also discussed the low funds for research and travel that would not allow parents to travel with young children. Resources can also include training and mentoring for academic parents on challenges of academic parenting. Several faculty expressed low levels of self-efficacy as they mentioned struggling with figuring out how they could do all they were asked to do to be successful, stating, for example, faculty members are “set up for failure from the get go. . . . I found out that maybe I’m just doing too much. . . . So I guess that’s me. . . . I’m still trying to figure out what I’m figuring out [early-career father].” Mentors would be in a position to assist faculty as they face these challenges.

Mentors can also coach the idea that, although academic parents should still have high standards, they may need to consider reducing expectations and accept publishing in lower-tier journals or allowing for shortcuts in parenting or housekeeping (Afful, 2013). It may also be important to set boundaries to separate the two roles at times, such as being fully engaged in family time. Additionally, discussions with academic parents can include the idea that achieving complete work-life balance is a myth. Faculty cannot truly achieve a point of balance, and framing it as a possibility creates unrealistic expectations (Cramer et al., 2019).

Several faculty members mentioned unsupportive administrators who disrupted work-life balance or empowerment. In academia, organizational culture, including family friendliness, is often impacted by direct supervisors (Hardy et al., 2018). Academic leaders, such as department chairs, should be trained to help promote work-life balance among academic parents so they can support faculty through the transition. We also recommend administrators be proactive in assisting, as academic parents may believe they have to address this challenge on their own.
Conclusion

Hardy et al. (2018) and Lester (2015) highlight that focusing on one institution is beneficial because all share the same university culture and policies; however, conclusions from these focus groups may be limited because they come from one university. Therefore, it is important to conduct more research at other teaching-focused institutions. Expectations and work-life balance can vary by institutions (Clark and Hill, 2010), and the lack of research outside of research-focused institutions makes understanding the complexities of academic parenting difficult. Future research should examine these same questions across other institutions and at other time points. It would also be beneficial to repeat this study in a few years to examine how the themes have changed with changes at the university as it shifts to a post-pandemic reality. Research can also explore more quantitatively the relation between faculty empowerment (McNaughtan et al., 2022) and parental status.

Overall, this work provides evidence of concrete ways institutions can improve the culture, faculty empowerment and work-life balance for academic parents and caregivers. These recommendations are focused on creating a positive culture for academic parents in higher education. These stories and recommendations are also relevant to faculty who have other duties outside of work, such as elder care (Cummins, 2012), and would likely improve faculty empowerment, work-life balance and morale more widely. We suggest that institutions work to examine informal expectations and formal policies at their institutions. However, we do not recommend any individual work alone on these issues. Oftentimes, it is useful to partner with other offices, including faculty development, faculty affairs, student affairs, faculty and student government, human resources and other relevant offices and committees at one’s institution. Working together, faculty and staff at an institution can help enhance alignment of expectations and perceptions of work-life balance, hopefully leading to happier, satisfied employees.

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Supplemental material

Focus group protocol

1. Introduction of moderator and explanation of purpose and rules for focus group

2. Participants’ introduction, including name, department, age(s) of kid(s) and parenting situation (co-parent in household, outside of household, etc.), normal kid school situation and current Covid-19, current teaching situation (modalities)

3. Questions
   - Why did you pick a university that balances teaching and research?
   - Describe your work-life balance. If you have one, what does your co-parent do and how does that impact your work-life balance? Does it match your expectations? (separate questions, allow to answer each before asking next)
- Can you achieve being a good parent and a good academic? (Probe for detail, not just yes or no)
- Did either role require a major sacrifice (e.g. delay having kids or have less kids than desired for your career or stop the tenure track because of parenthood)?
- How does [current institution] (administration or department level) hinder or support work-life balance? Or, do you have experience of another university better supporting work-life balance? (ask together)
- Explore the contradiction of academic life: high expectations, high stress, but also flexible and self-directed; little boundary between work and family expectations and time.
- What is/are the top major benefit(s) at a teaching institution (if time)?

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