

Baggage vs. Ballast: Work and Family on the Tenure Track

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The tenure track is a trying time. While you're on the track, you've got to devote your life to making a mark in your field. That's not easy when you have other things to devote your life to, like your small children, or your aging parents. Life is very different for faculty with family obligations (I'll call them *family faculty* for brevity), than it is for those without (I'll call them *single faculty* for a convenient label, recognizing that they may not actually be single). For family faculty on the tenure track, it's easy to look at their single colleagues with envy. Single faculty have so much time to spend on work, like they're still grad students. They can stay in the office until midnight. They don't have to go to the doctor for the baby wellness visit, or pick up kids at day care, or go to kindergarten back-to-school night. They can be so productive. How can family faculty be expected to match that productivity?

Part of the answer lies in understanding the difference between baggage and ballast. Family faculty have significant demands on their time and attention, time they might otherwise spend on work. The family is definitely extra weight slowing their boat on its journey toward tenure. But the family is not simply baggage dragging them down, the family instead acts as ballast that lets them move more smoothly than the lightweight speedboats piloted by their single colleagues. While family faculty can follow a steady trajectory through the turbulent waters of junior faculty life, single faculty are more easily buffeted and sent off course, changing direction instantly at any interesting distraction.

Distraction is one of the major hazards of the tenure track. There are so many opportunities, so many potential projects, and so little guidance about which to choose, that it is tempting to take on too many. Behind the closed doors of P&T committee meetings, phrases like "spread too thin", "too many irons in the fire", and "lack of focus" often surround unsuccessful cases of bright, hardworking people who fall victim to distraction.

I think family faculty are less vulnerable to this hazard. When they get a few precious hours to focus on research, they are more likely to use those hours to move their current project forward, rather than pursue daydreams about other projects that might be more profitable. Single faculty are more likely to take on projects and pursue opportunities they shouldn't. The extra time available for work is an asset only if they avoid the hazard of distraction; many of them do, but others don't. Family faculty are more likely to be protective of work time and carefully weigh the value of new opportunities before taking them on. Their family obligations make them less maneuverable, but that helps keep them on course.

Family faculty on the tenure track often face excruciating choices and stressful trials. I can't say I think life is any easier for them, but to anyone in that situation I will say that you should never forget the steadying effect of your family. They demand your time, but they can also give your mind the calm focus needed to navigate successfully in academia.