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"You can't hide your children anywhere": Perceptions of organizational support for work-life during the pandemic among academic couples who parent

Dawn K. Culpepper[1] | **Daniel J. Blake**[2]

[1]ADVANCE Program for Inclusive Excellence, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, USA

[2]Higher Education Division, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

Correspondence
Dawn Culpepper, ADVANCE Program for Inclusive Excellence, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, USA.
Email: dkculpep@umd.edu

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has refocused higher education on issues of work-life conflict among faculty members with children. This study draws from interviews with 13 heterosexual couples (26 participants) who were employed as faculty members and who cared for at least one child during the pandemic. Using the theory of perceived organizational support, we considered how institutional actions shaped the extent to which academic couples who parent felt supported in managing pandemic-related work-life conflict. We found centralized mechanisms for sharing concerns, innovative childcare resources, and flexibility and transparent communication enhanced participants' sense of organizational support, while inaction and unsystematic institutional responses undermined perceptions of organizational support. Our findings are consistent with past work on the relationship between organizational policies and resources and perceptions of organizational support, but also suggest alternative strategies for institutions that want to enhance perceived and real support for academic couples who parent.

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of pandemic-related school and daycare closures, many working parents have been forced to manage professional demands while simultaneously caring for children.

Faculty members at colleges and universities are no exception. Numerous op-eds and empirical studies show the numerous challenges faculty parents face in trying to maintain their teaching, research, and service while providing care for their children or extended family members (Clark et al., 2020; Deryugina et al., 2021). At the same time, faculty workloads have exploded: the rapid shift to virtual instruction, pandemic-related administrat, and the needs of students have all increased the amount of time faculty spend on work (Deryugina et al., 2021). Although there has been a push for institutions to acknowledge work-life challenges (Gonzales & Griffin, 2020; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021), relatively few institutions have come up with ways to support faculty, leaving many to feel as though their concerns have gone unheard (Siegal, 2021).

Academic couples are faculty members who are married/partnered to other faculty members, and those who are parents face particularly unique challenges within the context of the pandemic. Many academic couples are employed at the same institution (Schiebinger et al., 2008) and are therefore doubly influenced by their organization's approach to pandemic-related teaching, safety, and work-life policies. Regardless of the pandemic, academic couples, and particularly academic women, may experience strain related to maintaining work-life integration, particularly if they have children (Sallee & Lewis, 2020; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012; Zhang & Kmec, 2018). On the other hand, the flexibility of faculty careers may allow academic couples to better cope with pandemic-related work-life strain compared to dual-career couples in other industries (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Thus, the goal of this study was to understand how institutional actions shape the extent to which academic couples who are parents feel supported in managing pandemic-related work-life conflict. We defined work-life conflict as challenges in integrating personal and professional demands in ways that fit one's desired work and life styles (Culpepper et al., 2020; O'Meara & Campbell, 2011).

Understanding the experiences of academic couples is important for several reasons. Academic couples make up over a third of the U.S. professoriate (Schiebinger et al., 2008), but face challenges in finding academic positions in the same location and may be at high risk for departure (Sallee & Lewis, 2020). Given dire warnings that higher education may face an exodus of its professional workforce (Ellis, 2021), understanding how academic couples experience organizational support is therefore consequential for faculty morale and engagement (McClure & Hicklin-Fryar, 2022) as well as retention (Culver et al., 2020). Furthermore, women are more likely to be in an academic couple (Schiebinger et al., 2008; Zhang & Kmec, 2018), have experienced greater pandemic work-life stress (Deryugina et al., 2021), and are more likely to leave academia for work-life related reasons (Mason et al., 2013). Thus, understanding pandemic-related work-life is critical for ensuring gender equity in academe.

LITERATURE REVIEW: ACADEMIC WORK-LIFE, THE PANDEMIC, AND ACADEMIC COUPLES WHO PARENT

Academic work-life and the pandemic

Scholars have observed that higher education institutions are greedy (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012), demanding that faculty members conform to ideal worker norms: laser-focused on work, always responsive, and with no outside obligations (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014). These norms and expectations have been linked to work-life conflict and work-life stress for faculty members, especially those with children (Kachchaf et al., 2015; Reddick et al., 2012; Sallee, 2013; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). For example, studies show that even when higher education institutions offered workplace flexibility policies thought

to enhance "family-friendliness," faculty members are deterred from using them, fearing stigma, backlash, and long-term career consequences (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Kachchaf et al., 2015; Lundquist et al., 2012; Sallee, 2013). Although faculty fathers and faculty mothers encounter different barriers (Sallee, 2013), faculty parents regardless of gender often find that implicit norms and expectations, academic reward structures, and the increasing demands of the faculty role are inconsistent with the realities of modern parenting, which can lead to lower satisfaction, higher stress, less advancement, and higher departure (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Lundquist et al., 2012; Mason et al., 2013).

The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing work-life strain for faculty members with children. With an increase in service and teaching responsibilities (Deryugina et al., 2021), faculty members with children spent one hour less per week on research compared to pre-pandemic (Deryugina et al., 2021). However, the impact on women's scholarly productivity has been more pronounced, as demonstrated by grant applications, manuscript submissions, and faculty surveys (Deryugina et al., 2021; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021). Faculty members of color, from communities disproportionately affected by the pandemic, have likewise experienced increased caregiving, stress, and mental/emotional strain (Clark et al., 2020). With such evidence mounting, the pandemic may amplify existing gender and racial inequities in academe (Gonzales & Griffin, 2020; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021).

Institutions have responded to the pandemic in different ways. Recognizing the impact of the pandemic on faculty research productivity, many institutions implemented COVID-19 tenure extensions, integrated COVID-19 impact statements into promotion and annual reviews, provided temporary childcare subsidies, and/or changed teaching evaluation processes (Clark et al., 2020; Gonzales & Griffin, 2020). Yet these approaches have been widely critiqued. Policies and practices have been unevenly adopted and the uptake of policies like tenure delay remains to be seen (Flaherty, 2020). Tenure delays negatively impact salary and career advancement in the long-term and only apply to a small number of tenure-eligible faculty members (Malisch et al., 2020; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021). Modifications to evaluation processes do little to mitigate or reduce the daily stressors of the pandemic, leaving faculty members "to muddle through as best they can" (Gewin, 2021, p. 490). This approach may lead to burnout and departure (Gewin, 2021; McClure & Hicklin-Fryar, 2022).

Academic couples who parent

Academic couples who parent are a compelling population for studying the pandemic's impact on work-life conflict and work-life support. Surveys indicate that over a third of U.S. faculty members have a partner who is also an academic (Schiebinger et al., 2008). Data also show gendered and racialized patterns: women, particularly in STEM fields, are more likely to be a member of an academic couple, and faculty members from racially minoritized backgrounds also compose a significant portion of this group (McMahon et al., 2019; Schiebinger et al., 2008). Because of these trends, many researchers argue that the recruitment and retention of academic couples is a key strategy for enhancing gender and racial/ethnic diversity in the professoriate (Blake, 2020; Schiebinger et al., 2008; Zhang & Kmec, 2018).

Much of the literature on academic couples focuses on the policies and practices that institutions can use to enhance hiring (McMahon et al., 2019; Schiebinger et al., 2008; Zhang & Kmec, 2018), and with good reason. Academic couples face difficulty in finding two faculty positions at the same institution or within geographic proximity to one another (McMahon et al., 2019; Sallee & Lewis, 2020; Schiebinger et al., 2008). Thus, institutions that

want to attract and retain top talent often put in place dual-career accommodation policies and resources (Laursen & Austin, 2020).

Yet, academic couples face challenges beyond the hiring process as well. By default, the decisions a couple makes in their shared personal life have implications for both partners' careers (and vice versa). For instance, studies show that career progression between partners often becomes uneven if and when the couple has children (Yakaboski, 2016). That is, in heterosexual dual-career couples, women's careers often pause or stagnate after having children while men's continue to progress, therefore making it more likely that the man partner's career becomes the de facto lead in professional decisions thereafter. Even after the initial birth/adoption of a child, academic couples, like all dual-earner couples, encounter challenges in managing childrearing and domestic responsibilities with demanding careers (O'Connor & Cech, 2018). One partner, usually the woman in heterosexual relationships, typically does more caregiving and household tasks, and often does so at some professional cost (Culpepper, 2021; Kelly & McCann, 2019; Misra et al., 2012). Each partner's individual perspectives towards egalitarianism in careers also shape outcomes, in that partners who view their careers as "secondary" compared to their spouse/partner tend to report lower levels of organizational commitment and career satisfaction (Zhang & Kmec, 2018). Researchers have long argued that it is impossible to disentangle the personal from the professional among dual-career couples (Hochschild & Machung, 2012), and academic couples who parent are emblematic of the ways in which the boundaries between "work" and "life" are muddled, at best (Culpepper, 2021).

Given the ways in which work-life issues uniquely manifest among academic couples who parent, there is much reason to suspect that the pandemic, and institutional responses to it, would have real consequences for the stress, productivity, and overall professional satisfaction of this subgroup. As such, we sought a conceptual framework that illuminated the relationship between organizational behavior(s) and how employees interpret those behaviors. Academic couples who are parents provide informative insights on these perceptions, as they often share an institution and/or department and are thus navigating, interpreting, and influenced by the same organizational behaviors in their shared work-life. In the next section we discuss this framework, perceptions of organizational support.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Perceived organizational support posits that employees "develop global beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being" (Allen, 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002, p. 698). Perceptions of organizational support can be content general, reflecting an employee's overall sense that an organization is supportive of their global well-being, or content specific, pertaining to a specific type of role demand, such as work-life integration (Kossek et al., 2011). Given the focus on academic couples with children in this study, we were primarily interested in content-specific organizational support, or the ways that participants described their perceptions of organizational support for work-life challenges during the pandemic. However, we left open the possibility that a more content-general perception of organizational support for faculty well-being during the pandemic might also shape participants' perspectives.

Perceptions of organizational support for work-life are generated through a variety of channels. First, centralized work-life benefits and policies (e.g., parental leave) are critical for enhancing perceptions of organizational support (Kossek et al., 2011; Szelényi & Denson, 2019). Employees do not need to benefit immediately from organizational work-life policies to perceive that their organization is supportive and/or values work-life (Lai et al., 2009). Organizations that offer benefits like individualized work arrangements send the

signal that they value their employees, which an individual employee may appreciate even if they do not use the policy immediately (Lai et al., 2009).

Second, supervisors enhance perceptions of organizational support (Kossek et al., 2011). When department chairs have greater awareness of work-life policies, faculty members are more likely to use them and more likely to perceive their work environments as supportive of work-life integration (O'Meara & Campbell, 2011). Third, departmental colleagues and mentors enhance perceptions of organizational support by modeling integration behaviors and supporting individuals when they access work-life benefits (O'Meara & Campbell, 2011; Szelényi & Denson, 2019). Fourth, institutional culture, including norms, expectations, and communication, shape faculty perceptions of organizational support for work-life (Allen, 2001; Sallee, 2013; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Finally, perceptions of organizational support can be viewed at multiple levels of an organization. For instance, even when faculty members feel supported at the department level, negative perceptions of overall institutional support undermine their perceptions of organizational support overall (Szelényi & Denson, 2019).

Organizations derive numerous benefits from enhancing employee perceptions of organizational support in work-life. Employees who perceive that their organizations care about their ability to manage their work and lives are more satisfied with their jobs and more committed to their organizations (Cullen et al., 2014). They are more likely to work harder and engage as institutional citizens (Chen et al., 2009). Relevant to the pandemic, employees who experience greater levels of organizational support are also better able to cope with work-related stress (Jex, 1998). Overall, they are less likely to leave and more productive (Allen, 2001), making perceptions of organizational support a critical factor in an institution's ability to fulfill its mission and goals.

METHODOLOGY

The research question guiding this study was: How do institutional actions shape the extent to which academic couples who parent feel supported in managing pandemic-related work-life conflict? We used a general qualitative approach rooted by the constructivist epistemological stance to seek to understand how people interpret their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The emergent context of the COVID-19 pandemic and exploratory nature of the research question made this a well-suited approach for the study (Kahlke, 2014).

Our participants were dual-career academic couples with children who worked in postsecondary institutions in the United States and Canada. To be eligible, participants needed to identify as a couple, both work full-time as faculty members at a postsecondary institution, and have at least one child under the age of 18 living in their household. We recruited participants primarily via social media. Recruitment and data collection took place during fall 2020 and early winter 2021, which overlapped with the initial rollout of COVID-19 vaccines.

Our sample included 13 academic couples at 11 universities (See Table 1 for information about the participants, including the pseudonyms by which they are referred to in the findings). Twelve couples consisted of partners who were employed at the same university. Most couples worked at public doctoral universities, and seven couples worked in the same department or academic unit. Individually, participants represented a range of academic ranks and appointment types: four full professors, nine associate professors, nine assistant professors, and four professors in contingent (adjunct; lecturer) faculty roles. Participants also represented a range of academic fields/disciplines, including professional fields (e.g., education, business), arts and humanities, social sciences, and science and engineering. All couples identified as heterosexual; Thirteen participants identified as men and

TABLE 1 Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Gender/Race/Title	Institutional Type/Region	Share a Department (Y/N)	Children under 18 (N)
Courtney and John	Woman/White/Full Prof. Man/White/Assoc. Prof.	Public Doctoral Univ.	N	2
Artemisia and Brett	Woman/White/Lecturer Man/White/Assist. Prof.	Public Doctoral Univ.	N	1
Hazel and Julio	Woman/White/Assoc. Prof. Man/Hispanic/Assoc. Prof.	Public Doctoral Univ.	Y	2
Erica and Malcolm	Woman/White/Assoc. Prof. Man/White/Assoc. Prof.	Public Doctoral Univ.	Y	1
Kimberly and Noah	Woman/White/Full Prof. Man/White/Full Prof.	Public Doctoral Univ.	N	1
Brandon and Crystal	Woman/White/Assoc. Prof. Man/White/Assoc. Prof.	Public Doctoral Univ.	Y	2
Nicole and Stephen	Woman/White/Assist. Prof Man/White/Assist. Prof.	Public Doctoral Univ.	Y	2
Deana and Peter	Woman/Multiracial/Adjunct Lecturer and Academic Staff Man/White/Lecturer	Private Doctoral Univ.	Y	2
Kara and Chris	Woman/White/Adjunct Assist. Prof. Man/White/Assoc. Prof.	Private Bacc. College	Y	2
Brooke and Jamie	Woman/White/Assist. Prof. Man/White/Full Prof.	Public Master's Univ.	N	2
Mona and Dominick	Woman/White/Assist. Prof. Man/African American/Assist. Prof.	Public Doctoral Univ.	Y	2
Lily and Saul	Woman/Asian/Assoc. Prof Man/White/Assist. Prof	Private Doctoral Univ.	N	3
Bonnie and Kent	Woman/White/Assist. Prof Man/Other/Assist. Prof.	Public Master's Univ./Public Doctoral Univ.	N	4

TABLE 2 Positive influences on perceptions of organizational support

Influence	Description
Centralized Mechanisms for Sharing Concerns	Creation of faculty working groups, taskforces, community open forums, and other communication channels where faculty members with children could share concerns, discuss needed supports, and ask questions of institutional administrators.
Innovating to Support Expanded Childcare Needs	Creatively using institutional resources/facilities to provide faculty parents with consistently available childcare and/or childcare resources in the community.
Leading with Transparency and Flexibility	Offering faculty parents workplace flexibility, options in teaching modality; Making transparent and communicating organizational decisions to faculty in a timely and transparent manner.

13 participants identified as women. Three couples had one child under the age of 18 living at home and 10 couples had more than one child. Child ages ranged from less than 1 year old to 18 years old. Twenty-one participants identified as White; one as Black; one as Hispanic; one as Asian; one as Multiracial; and one as other race/ethnicity.

Data collection

We divided the interviews between us (the lead author conducted nine interviews and the second author conducted four) and conducted one interview with each couple. We conducted interviews via video call; they typically lasted an hour. Interviews were guided by a semi-structured protocol that focused on participants experiences navigating work and life during the pandemic and the extent to which their institutions had provided support during this time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Joint interviews allowed us to see how participants interacted with each other and their environment (Jorgenson, 2016). This was relevant in this study because we were interviewing couples who were in their homes during a pandemic. It was not uncommon for participants with young children to be caring for them during the interview. Such observations, in combination with the experiences the participants shared, painted a comprehensive picture of how the pandemic affected their lives and brought the importance of institutional support for families to the fore.

FINDINGS

Our results indicated that institutional actions, and inaction, influenced the extent to which academic couples felt supported and valued by their institutions. We present the findings in two sections. In the first section, we discuss findings related to the kinds of institutional actions that seemed to shape positive perceptions of organizational support for pandemic-related work-life conflict (See Table 2). In the second, we discuss the types of institutional actions that undermined perceptions of organizational support (See Table 3).

Institutional actions that positively shaped perceptions of organizational support

Our results indicated three main institutional actions that appeared to positively influence participants' perception that their institutions were supportive of their work-life

TABLE 3 Negative influences on perceptions of organizational support

Influence	Description
Inaction	Commending faculty parents but offering no tangible interventions, resources, or policies; Not changing work expectations despite caregiving demands.
Unsystematic Approaches to Faculty Support	Frequent changes to faculty policies, practices, and procedures; Relying on faculty parents to individually negotiate for workload supports rather than proactively offering resources or accommodations.

needs: centralized mechanisms for sharing concerns; expanded support for childcare, and transparent and flexible leadership.

Implementing centralized mechanisms for sharing concerns

Several participants described the creation of campus committees or working groups on families and caregiving as contributing to their sense of organizational support. Deana reported: "[The campus] immediately formed a working group for families…they formed a task force of faculty and staff parents to create a network of support to kind of interface with HR, talk about what kind of benefits existed for people who had additional caregiving responsibilities and didn't know where to find that help." Deana and Peter further explained that their institution created a Slack channel for faculty where information about COVID-19-related issues was published, as well as a Facebook group for parents that allowed faculty parents to ask questions and make their concerns visible. As Deana and Peter's comments showed, such efforts made them feel like the institution was responsive to (or at least trying to understand) pandemic-related work-life stressors.

Women participants, who often shared a greater burden in adapting to increased work-life demands, were particularly inclined to seek opportunities to inform institutional responses. For example, Crystal and Erica each served on their institution's COVID-19 task force as faculty representatives, which gave them a voice in decision-making processes; Deana likewise shared that she had become actively involved in giving feedback to her university's caregivers taskforce. It was clear that participants felt higher levels of organizational support for their work-life concerns when they could see that faculty caregivers were formally represented in decision-making processes and/or there were meaningful opportunities for faculty with children to share their experiences and get information.

Innovating to support expanded childcare needs

Three couples indicated that their institutions had attempted to respond to the needs of faculty parents by creating new childcare resources. Erica and Malcolm explained that their institution had converted a local museum and campus hotel to childcare centers, wherein faculty could drop off their children for a few hours if needed, for instance, while teaching. Crystal and Brandon's institution likewise provided faculty with access to drop-in subsidized childcare. Interestingly, neither Erica and Malcolm nor Crystal and Brandon actually availed themselves of such childcare, but regardless, they found the active provision of such a resource to be a signal that their institution at least recognized pandemic-related caregiving burdens. As Erica explained, the provision of new resources showed that "the administration was absolutely 100% on board" and "very family-friendly," which enhanced her and her partner Malcolm's sense that the university was doing what it could to leverage resources to support faculty parents.

Leading with transparency and flexibility

Institutional leaders, including department chairs, deans, and central administrators, were also critical for positive perceptions of institutional support. Many faculty members indicated that their department chairs had offered flexibility, support, and understanding as they navigated caregiving and work. Mona explained:

> Our department has been very flexible. Each faculty meeting, our chair starts with a comment about how difficult he knows it must be for other people in the department that have children. Because of that, he hasn't asked people with children to do certain service things if not necessary.

Couples like Hazel/Julio, Jamie/Brooke, Erica/Malcolm, and Peter/Deana likewise felt they had supportive department chairs and/or deans who helped them weather the pandemic. It was apparent that participants did not expect their department chairs to have solutions for every problem. Rather, they felt supported when leaders tried to understand their experiences, offered flexibility when possible, and felt like their unit leaders communicated faculty parents' concerns to upper-level administrators.

Faculty members at institutions whose central administrators took a more realistic and flexible approach to pandemic-related campus policies also seemed to have enhanced perceptions of organizational support. Chris described an interaction with his provost in which he expressed concerns about continued school closures for his children. The provost responded that if that was the case, the hope would be that faculty members would have flexibility to pivot courses online. It was not that Chris expected a definitive answer from the provost, nor did he think the provost needed to account for every contingency faculty parents might encounter. Instead, Chris appreciated that the provost was being realistic about the uncertainty of the future and was therefore building flexibility into the approach. This kind of flexibility extended to parents signaled institutional leaders understood that childcare during the pandemic was a constantly evolving situation with no single right answer.

Institutional actions that negatively shaped perceptions of organizational support

Although some participants revealed situations in which they felt supported, many others indicated that their institutions had by and large failed to support faculty with caregiving duties during the pandemic. There were two main institutional behaviors that negatively shaped couples' perceptions of organizational support: inaction and unsystematic approaches to faculty supports.

Inaction

As Kent explained, the pandemic had forced institutions to "grapple with the fact that, 'you can't hide your children anywhere, you have children at home, and there's no place you can send them.'" This stress was apparent across couples in our study, as many, especially those with young children like Jamie/Brooke, Noah/Kimberly, Peter/Deana, and Chris/Kara, participated in their interview with their children sitting on their laps and/or paused to go check on them at various points throughout.

Most couples indicated that their institutions had taken no action to support, accommodate, or provide helpful resources to faculty managing childcare duties. Mona and Dominick explained that during faculty meetings, even when faculty members offered

suggestions for resources that would be helpful, administrators indicated that there was nothing they could provide. They said:

> Mona: We'd have full college faculty meetings with the dean and the president. All these people, they've specifically asked and [the administrators] say, "Oh, no. There's nothing we can do."
>
> Dominick: All they do is applaud the people that have kids that are doing this somehow. [They say] "We don't know how you're doing [it]."
>
> Mona: [The faculty] asked for teaching relief. They asked for daycare because the on-campus daycare that a majority of folks used was closed from March through August…[the administrators] haven't done anything. They said pretty much their hands are tied.

Lily mirrored these sentiments about her university, saying, "one of the things that hasn't happened, is [university's] recognition that some of the people in our community are suffering a lot more than others, and that those people need to be supported." The lack of action and acknowledgement therefore lowered participants' sense that the organization was even aware of the challenges faculty parents faced related to childcare.

Some participants shared that their institution's resistance to providing support for faculty parents or even acknowledging their challenges rendered negative emotions. For instance, Brett and Artemisia attended a university town hall, which was marketed as an open forum for campus community members. Artemisia and Brett felt that the pandemic had revealed their university's overall attitude of "we are a top research institution, consider yourselves lucky that you're here." Artemisia and Brett's anger and frustration at their institution was apparent as they relayed this feeling, as they both became more adamant throughout the interview and indicated that they had begun to look for jobs at other universities. Jamie likewise shared, "we've struggled a lot with the anxiety connected to [institutional decision-making] … both of us were almost to a point where we were ready to be without jobs rather than going back into a classroom because we predicted what would be happening [with the rise in COVID-19 cases]." As Jamie shared these struggles, the physical weariness that he and Brooke both experienced as a result of stress, caregiving, and institutional inaction came through. As their two young children came on and off the screen, playing in the background, they both looked tired and resigned. It was clear that the way in which their universities communicated with faculty undermined their sense of well-being, exacerbated stress, and caused couples to consider departing their institutions.

Participants also described institutional inaction related to expectations around research, teaching, and service. For example, Julio and Hazel explained:

> Julio: Some of the stress has just been in the culture of our department. We continue seeing the message that standards haven't changed, everyone has to be as productive as they've always been regardless of what else is going on. I'm sure that's fine for most of the faculty who…
>
> Hazel: Who don't have kids.
>
> Julio: Or have kids that are fully grown and out of the house or just never had kids. That's the majority of our department. They can just keep working.

Concerns about research productivity were echoed among couples who were earlier in their careers or who had more recently started new faculty positions. For example, although Dominick and Mona were both assistant professors, when the pandemic hit, Dominick was

closer to going up for tenure whereas Mona had just started her faculty role. As Dominick explained, he had "inertia" going into the pandemic: several ongoing grants, data coming in, and graduate students in place. He said that despite the pandemic, "this might have been one of the most productive years." Mona, on the other hand, as a new assistant professor, encountered challenges in setting up her lab and recruiting students and was fearful that in the long-term, her lack of productivity would negatively impact her opportunities for tenure, even with an automatic COVID-19 tenure delay in place. Mona's stress was evident when she said:

> I can't go to the lab if [my students] have a problem because we have such [a] crazy [childcare] schedule, that's just not possible a lot of the time. It's been really, really, really hard for me. I'm jealous of Dominick's, his working machine, well-oiled machine… I don't have that set of support within my lab since I just started. It's been bad for productivity for sure.

Mona's experience in this case reflected the larger concern that institutional inaction may exacerbate gender inequities in academe among women, for instance, making tenure less attainable for Mona in the years to come. Kent/Bonnie, Saul/Lily, and Brett/Artemesia likewise indicated that their scholarly productivity had dropped due to the combination of childcare demands, increased teaching and service, and a lack of access to research sites and materials. Although they had concerns about the short-term stress of managing childcare and their daily responsibilities, their long-term concern was that expectations (i.e., in teaching or in research), had not shifted to account for the pandemic's burden on caregivers. Unchanging expectations undermined any positive policies or practices (e.g., tenure delays) universities had put in place.

Unsystematic approaches to faculty support

Couples realized that decision-making during the pandemic was difficult. Yet, frequent changes in policies and procedures regarding in-person instruction and the process to request remote instruction accommodations exacerbated couples' perceptions that their institution was not looking out for faculty well-being or safety. Jamie and Brooke described the process for asking to teach virtually as "all over the place" and "changing almost daily." Such uncoordinated responses added to Jamie and Brooke's existing work-life stress and contributed to their sense that their institutions did not take concerns about teaching in person seriously. Other participants like Courtney/John mentioned that bureaucratic rules and implementation issues undermined the ability of researchers to charge leave to grants, in essence rendering policies ineffective. Overall, participants indicated that the constantly changing nature of university policies, protocols, and decision-making magnified the already stressful endeavor of navigating work and caregiving during the pandemic.

In lieu of central policies, faculty members had often had to strike individual deals with their department or college leadership to weather the pandemic, which also undermined perceptions of organizational support. Multiple participants described their institution's approach to supporting faculty parents as "ad hoc," "under the surface," or "not systematic." For example, Dominick explained that teaching and workload accommodations were "completely dependent on the whims of your supervisor or whoever is in charge of you." In some cases, good department chairs or deans helped facilitate these idiosyncratic deals. However, Lily's experience revealed the challenges associated with relying on department leaders to provide faculty support. She explained:

> I asked my department head, "What are you going to do if we start, if the kids go back home and have to learn from home again?" and he was like, "What do you mean?" And I was like, "Well, I'm not able to teach, and also take care of my kids at the same time." And he was like, "You can't ask me to give you a teaching release just because you can't manage." And I was like, "Oh, well, why not?" And he said, "Well, then everybody will ask for one." And I was like, "I can remind you that I'm the only one in our department, who has three small children." And he was like, "Well, but this will set a bad precedent."

As this story highlights, without central policies in place, Lily was reliant on her chair's discretion to provide workload accommodation. Her chair resisted, so she ultimately had to leverage her pre-existing relationship with her dean to access a teaching release to support her expanded childcare responsibilities. Brooke also indicated that she had to advocate individually with her dean to get permission to teach and advise students virtually rather than in-person. Accommodations to navigate the pandemic were an area in which gender differences among couples emerged, with women like Brooke and Lily expressing more concern about needing workplace flexibility, and more pushback for requesting it, than men participants. Although Lily and Brooke ultimately prevailed, it was a result of their persistence and pre-existing relationships with academic leaders rather than a systematic institutional approach to supporting faculty parents.

DISCUSSION

Overall, our findings showed that the actions that universities took and signals that they sent influenced the extent to which academic couples with children perceived their universities as being supportive of their work-life demands. We found that academic couples did not need resource-intensive interventions from their institutions to feel supported during the pandemic. Rather, perceptions of organizational support were enhanced when couples felt their institutions realized the effort they were expending in both the personal and professional realms; when they felt their concerns as parents were being taken into consideration as institutions made decisions (e.g., through shared governance or campus working groups); and when communication was transparent and reliable. In contrast, inaction and unsystematic approaches to faculty supports undermined participants' sense that institutions valued their contributions or cared about their experiences as faculty parents. Negative perceptions were particularly underwritten by a lack of urgency in addressing the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on faculty parents' work capacity and work-life stress. These findings are consistent with past work on the relationship between perceptions of organizational support and organizational policies, practices, and actions (Allen, 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). However, our findings underscore the notion that faculty members were actively searching for signals that their institutions valued their effort and recognized their challenges.

Our study points to concrete actions that institutions can take to enhance perceptions, and the reality, of organizational support. We urge institutions to act upon these recommendations to enhance retention and resilience as academic parents continue to manage their personal and professional lives:

- Acknowledge the ongoing toll of work-life stresses and the level of effort faculty members have expended during the pandemic. Administrators, deans, and department chairs need to communicate they are aware of these demands and efforts, as silence is

interpreted by faculty as a response and signal that institutions do not value or support them. Some institutions have provided financial bonuses to recognize such efforts, while others have provided additional time off or experimented with alternative work schedules. Sustaining this flexibility and providing ongoing recognition, as resources allow, may offer faculty members the time and space to recover from the last two years and enhance their overall sense that their institutions support them and appreciate their contributions.

- Make institutional efforts visible. Our results suggest that awareness of the presence of policies and practices related to family caregiving enhanced perceptions of organizational support, even if faculty members did not use them. Creating centralized websites that provide up-to-date links on work-family benefits; using multiple channels to communicate benefits (e.g., emails, social media, grassroots faculty or parenting groups); and ensuring that deans and department chairs know about policies and practices are all measures for furthering awareness and usage.
- Enhance accommodation structures. Consider the kinds of policies and guidance that will provide structure to accommodation processes (e.g., requesting teaching modality flexibility; accessing family or sick leave) instead of relegating individual faculty members to advocate and negotiate on their own.
- Sustain caregiver workgroups developed during the pandemic. Many participants in our study reported that committees, taskforces, or workgroups formed during the pandemic increased their sense of representation and voice in institutional decision-making. Administrators should consider institutionalizing such committees to provide ongoing mechanisms for feedback on caregiving concerns, even after the pandemic subsides.

CONCLUSION

In the long-term, the perception that there was a lack of organizational support for academic parents during the pandemic may have consequences for satisfaction and commitment (Gewin, 2021; McClure & Hicklin-Fryar, 2022; Siegal, 2021). Faculty members, particularly academic couples, may be less inclined to leave academic jobs due to the precarity of the academic market; however, retaining faculty who are dissatisfied, unengaged, or resentful may have harmful effects on departments and institutions (McClure & Hicklin-Fryar, 2022). As such, institutions and academic leaders should pay attention to the large and small ways they can meaningfully enhance organizational support for both work-life and overall well-being for faculty parents—as our results showed, the two go hand in hand.

ORCID

Dawn K. Culpepper https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3547-4615
Daniel J. Blake https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2244-9653

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Dawn K. Culpepper, PhD, is Research Assistant Professor and Associate Director at the University of Maryland ADVANCE Program for Inclusive Excellence. Her research focuses on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the academic workplace, including issues related to faculty and graduate student work-life, workload, hiring, evaluation, and rewards systems.

Daniel J. Blake, PhD, is a Provost Postdoctoral Fellow in the Higher Education Division at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. His research focuses on issues of equity and diversity in the academic workforce, including how institutional policies and practices further or hinder the representation and inclusion of minoritized scholars.

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