Changing Tables and Changing Culture: Pregnancy, Parenting, and First-Year Writing

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Over the past seven years, the 59 full-time faculty of Duke University’s first-year writing faculty have birthed, fathered, or adopted 22 babies, making our collective birth rate roughly equivalent to that of Guinea or The Gambia. Even as I write this, four more babies are expected during the 2008-09 academic year from what is currently our 28-person full-time writing program faculty. What makes this faculty birth rate so staggering is not only that it nearly triples the United States’ national average, but also that it differentiates our program from so many other spaces in academia where births tend to be an occasion rather than a norm. Our birth rate is even more significant in that it persists in spite of what is a welcome but insufficient three-week paid parental leave for our program’s full-time faculty members. Nevertheless, baby showers, photographs of children, family-friendly events, communal babysitting, and talk about pregnancy and parenting—all of this is deeply interwoven into our academic lives as teachers and scholars of first-year writing and informs our nationally and locally acclaimed work. We even have changing tables installed in the women’s and men’s restrooms of our building.

Such prolific fecundity raises significant questions about pregnancy and parenting in the context of first-year writing: Does faculty pregnancy and parenting pose any meaningful impact on the work of first-year writing? Does this impact differ from that experienced by faculty in the natural or social sciences, other humanities, or even rhetoric? Given that first-year writing is home to a largely contingent faculty, likely not to enjoy the parental-leave policy support offered to many tenure-track faculty, how might first-year writing faculty and writing program administrators (WPAs) create an academic, socio-cultural climate that embraces pregnancy and parenting? What might be the advantages of doing so? To pursue these questions, I will examine several constrictions uniquely facing first-year writing faculty, especially women, and will then illustrate a range of programmatic strategies that can help foster a more family-friendly, socio-cultural climate in first-year writing programs.

The First-Year Writing Context

Although a considerable amount has been written about parenting and pregnancy in the academy, much of it operates from two overarching per-
perspectives: 1. a deliberately generalist approach and 2. an often dominant focus on policy. As this section will demonstrate, neither of these approaches fits well within the context of first-year writing because of its institutional position and the demographics of its faculty. In comparison to other faculty, first-year writing faculty are more likely to be of child-bearing (or rearing) age, are more likely to face unique disincentives to having children since they are often in an aspirational stage of their careers, and they are more likely to be excluded from policy support. Moreover, I argue that although many policy advances have been made in the past two decades, and many of the challenges facing women in rhetoric and composition, richly documented by such scholars as Theresa Enos, Louise Wetherbee Phelps, and Janet Emig, may have been largely mitigated, these advances are mostly applicable to more established academics (i.e., tenure-stream faculty), and there still remain systemic, political, cultural, and institutionalized controls that continue to exert powerful influences and limitations on the child-bearing decisions of first-year writing faculty, particularly women.

First-Year Writing and Policy Limitations

Policies are crucial mechanisms for addressing the material realities of pregnancy and parenting, and they also go far in shaping and reflecting socio-cultural climate. In recent years, many new and improved family-related policies have emerged in the academy, from better paid-leave options and job sharing to stopping the tenure clock. However, first-year writing faculty, who are arguably more likely to be having children because of their general age-related demographics, are actually less likely to be supported by these very policies because of their often contingent status as graduate students, adjuncts, or part-timers. Eileen E. Schell has asserted that nearly 80 percent of writing teachers are non-tenure track (6). And Mary Ann Mason and Eve Mason Ekman maintain that “[p]art-time and adjunct faculty are . . . the fastest growing-segment of employees in academia . . . [and] this temporary track is overpopulated with women, usually women with children” (85). Compounding this is that most first-year writing faculty are overworked and underpaid—with limited professional recognition, resources, and time, and are therefore even more deeply in need of policy support with regard to pregnancy and parenting.

While I vigorously support continued efforts to improve and broaden family-related policies in academia, I find it unlikely in the near future that first-year writing faculty will enjoy better policy support. As such, it is crucial to develop strategies for bettering the socio-cultural climate for pregnancy and parenting among first-year writing faculty. And, although many who write about pregnancy and parenting emphasize the importance of socio-cultural climate, they also seem often unable to articulate specifi-
cally what such a family-friendly culture might look like and instead focus predominantly on policy. The 2001 the American Academy of University Professors Statement of Principles on Family Responsibilities and Academic Work, for instance, devotes only 300 of its nearly 3900 words to an explicit discussion of socio-cultural climate. Clearly, more work needs to be done in the context of those excluded from policy support, such as most first-year writing faculty, to understand and articulate the specific features of a family-friendly socio-cultural climate.

First-Year Writing and Institutional Paradox

Institutionally, first-year writing occupies a dichotomous, paradoxical position that adds a subtly complex dimension to the development of a family-friendly climate for first-year writing faculty. In one sense, because first-year writing is, as Sue Ellen Holbrook and others have argued, a service course, it struggles against a stubborn perception held by students, parents, faculty, and administrators who believe that first year writing is less legitimate than other university courses. At the same time, however, since first-year writing officially introduces students to the intellectual demands of the university, it also occupies one of the most visible positions in the academy. Although operating at somewhat cross purposes, these two contexts can create expectations that first-year writing maintain exceptional academic rigor—continually proving its worth and legitimacy in ways that typically would not include pregnancy, changing tables, and playpens.

Despite work like Hélène Cixous’s *I’ecriture feminine* or other powerful thinking on motherhood and writing by such intellectuals as Nancy Chodorow, Adrienne Rich, and Alice Walker, such scholars as Alicia Ostriker remind us of the deeply entrenched academic legacy of the antimaternal: “[T]he world of the mind as it has constituted itself in the West and is reconstructed every generation in the institutions of higher learning, is not only androcentric and misogynist in general but intensely anti-maternal” (5). According to Katherine Callen King, “The academy has come to be structured . . . around the rhythms of the aristocratic male body, which can be seen as a birther (and burier) of ideas . . . Women who are sexless are clearly regarded as less female, less corporeal, while those who are pregnant are as obviously female, as obviously corporeal, as they can be” (8). Regrettably, this legacy seems largely to persist: the majority of the personal narratives in the 2008 anthology *Mama PhD* offer grueling experiences of the incompatibility between pregnancy, parenting, and academia.

Of course, the academy has made great advances in dismantling this disjuncture. Many of the anecdotes in *Mama PhD* also “showcase glimmers of hope” (Peskowitz xiv) through women who have found ways to combine family and academe. Indeed, children and pregnancy are becoming more
visible in many departments, and scholars of embodiment theory, such as Renee Hoogland, argue that “any form of mind/body distinction can no longer be legitimately maintained” (214-15). Still, these advances are largely applicable to the academy writ large. Thus, while Ms. Mentor’s decades-old advice for female academics to hide babies might seem out of date—“Let it not be said that Ms. Mentor is unsympathetic with mothering . . . Yet that is exactly what Ms. Mentor must advise you to do. . . . [A] woman seen with a baby is believed to be ‘un-serious’” (Toth 119)—I would suggest that it still holds currency for first-year writing faculty, particularly women.

Bobbi Ann Hammill’s recent work on mothering, composition, and pedagogy, for example, testifies to a persistent anti-maternalism in composition by revealing the stories of four women compositionists, each of whom harbor “a narrative of self-doubt in regard to her own abilities as a scholar, researcher, and academic writer despite the reality that [each] has earned a doctorate in rhetoric and composition” (99). Similarly, Diane P. Freedman and Martha Stoddard Holmes’s collection, The Teacher’s Body, also demonstrates—albeit unintentionally—how differently pregnancy can impact female teachers of first-year writing. Significantly, the tenure-track women in this collection recount positive experiences with pregnancy and teaching. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, Assistant Professor in the Institutes of Liberal Arts and Women’s Studies, maintains that she taught through her pregnant body and her “pedagogical style evolved along with [her] pregnancy” (195). Allison Giffen, Assistant Professor of English, also records a successful experience as a pregnant professor: “Students appeared to be having a satisfactory experience, and their evaluations were strong for both courses” (206). Another tenure-stream faculty member referenced in the text, Sandra Sims-Patterson, Associate Professor of Psychology, likewise reflects on the positive pedagogical impact of her pregnancy: “I learned to take more risks in the classroom, I learned to pace myself during a class, something that I wasn’t good at before” (qtd. in Wallace-Sanders 195).

Importantly, although Wallace-Sanders concedes that the visible sexuality and maternity of pregnancy “can undermine . . . [classroom] authority” (188), her tenure-stream position enables her to rise above that potential risk. Not so for all members of the academy. Unlike the positive tone emanating from Sims-Patterson and Wallace-Sanders, the account by Amy Gerald, a PhD student who taught composition during her third trimester, offers a markedly different picture of how well—or not—pregnancy and pedagogy can intersect. Gerald notes that her “course evaluations for [the semester in which she was pregnant] were . . . lower than the evaluations from previous semesters” (182). Five students made negative comments: “When asked, ‘What changes would you recommend the teacher make next time s/he teaches the course?’ they responded with “Don’t be pregnant” or “not have another baby” (182). Gerald admits that she did enact certain
pedagogical changes while pregnant: she “had to visit the restroom more often, and . . . needed to sit down during the course of the class period” and, because her “due date was about two weeks before the end of the semester, [she] was forced temporarily to abandon the portfolio/process-based teaching method” (182). Citing Schell’s claim that female faculty must be “competent and nurturing” (qtd. in Gerald 182) in order to gain high student evaluations, Gerald hypothesizes that she focused on competence (outcomes and deadlines) rather than nurturing (process and feedback) to counter her anxiety over being perceived as over-nurturing by virtue of her pregnancy.

Gerald’s experience resonates with Joan Williams’s contention that “[p]regnant women and mothers who go out of their way to be perceived as competent may encounter negative reactions to their assertiveness” (“Hitting . . .”). However, another significant factor influencing this situation involves the context of first-year writing, where the potential deauthorization attending pregnancy is heightened because its position in the academy is already somewhat marginalized and delegitimized.

A number of our female faculty members have also had somewhat plagued experiences with pregnant teaching. One colleague, Tamera Marko, recalls during her pregnancy that a male student repeatedly made inappropriate jokes about pregnancy in ways that undermined her authority. When she arrived one day a few minutes late to class, he chastised her, saying sardonically, “Oh, she’s playing the pregnancy card again.” Another colleague, Parag Budhecha, felt particular resistance from her male students during the semester in which she was pregnant: “The male students seemed to just dismiss me. I could see them rolling their eyes while I was speaking and I sensed a general level of hostility from them, making me feel I had to work even harder to prove my intellectual and academic worth.” During one of the semesters in which I was pregnant, while distributing course evaluations to students, one student suggested that in the name space he would write, “The one with the baby.” These students, of course, have likely experienced pregnant teachers before, but because first-year writing may so often be held to archaic, extraordinary standards of what constitutes legitimate academic work, and because, as the next section discusses, of the intimacy often informing first-year writing pedagogy, pregnancy can give rise more often in this setting to such moments of student resistance and/or hostility.

Maternal Pedagogy, not Maternity

Expectations about what first-year writing is or should be on the part of students, administration, other departments, and even in the self-perceptions of first-year writing faculty persist even though composition often inhabits a veritable breeding ground for a wide array of unconventional (liberatory,
maternal, transgressive) pedagogies that challenge traditional academic practice (i.e., more flexible room configurations, personal rapport, changes in traditional power hierarchies, etc.). And, although this pedagogy may make the teaching of writing more effective, it also complicates pregnancy in the first-year writing classroom by further compromising academic authority.

Spatially, the intimate configuration of the first-year writing classroom, where teachers routinely move around the room rather than stand behind a lectern, has occasioned for most of my pregnant colleagues and me an accidental bump of our bellies into students. Such awkward moments foreground for students the corporeality of their first-year writing professor. Pregnant teachers of first-year writing—exhibiting what Wallace-Sanders terms the “doubled body” (188)—can be particularly susceptible to the negative implications of being perceived as too feminine or too maternal and must work against a doubly fortified wall of deeply engrained perceptions that continually question whether mothers, but especially first-year writing faculty, are as legitimately academic as are others working in more entrenched disciplines.

Let me emphasize that I am deeply attached to spatial configurations in the composition classroom that promote effective writing through an intimate, socially collaborative environment. However, the visibility of pregnancy can delimit faculty autonomy in establishing the extent of this intimacy. At times, this physical intimacy can generate the most insidious features of Susan Bordo’s “politics of appearance” (27), where some first-year writing students feel entitled to ask a barrage of seemingly innocuous personal questions that, consciously or not, enable them to situate their pregnant professor within or against a set of perceived cultural norms: Is she married? Is she heterosexual? Did she conceive through intercourse? During the semesters in which I have taught as a visibly pregnant woman, my students have known more about my personal life than in any other semester of my thirteen-year teaching career. They knew more about my personal life than I would have, given the choice, shared.

Such conjecturing on the part of students is perhaps a pinnacle exemplification, and hierarchical reversal, of the Foucauldian gaze: “Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself” (155). And, while anyone might be uncomfortable under such a gaze, the pregnant first-year writing teacher suddenly becomes not only more rigorously scrutinized, and more heavily embodied, but also seemingly more at odds with the disembodied cerebralism our students may have come to value and expect in the academy and that first-year writing faculty are often relentlessly committed to attaining. Where tenure-stream faculty have the external authorization, recognition, and titles to combat such perceptions, first-year writing faculty
are often left wondering if pregnancy will obfuscate what little academic, intellectual clout they may have with their students.¹³

First-Year Writing as an Aspirational Career Stage Rather than a Career

Many first-year writing faculty envision their work as part of an aspirational career stage rather than an end in and of itself. These faculty often begin their academic careers (as graduate students or new Ph.Ds, perhaps viewing composition as a temporary jumping-off point) facing all the attendant pressures to succeed in the academy by constructing themselves in accordance with the version of professionalism that often requires extreme dedication to scholarship and nearly unfettered economic and geographical freedom (i.e., attending conferences, finding time for unremunerated scholarship, etc.). Perhaps because composition has historically had so much at stake in gaining disciplinary recognition, the reconfiguration of pedagogical practices has had little bearing on the ways in which compositionists acclimate to traditional notions of what constitutes the ideal academic worker. Grounded on what Perna describes as quantifiable measures of productivity—"the number of hours worked, the number of journal articles produced, the number of grants received" (21)—composition and rhetoric continues to embrace the ambitious American worker described by such scholars as Mary Catherine Bateson and Rachel Hile Bassett.¹⁴ The ideal worker extolled by academia is further complicated in the context of first-year writing by what can be the enormous time and energy demands emanating from instructor response to student writing. Adding expectations of scholarship to this workload (whether self- or externally-imposed) can render work demands nearly unmanageable.

Often, this desire to embody the ideal academic to gain professional advancement is woven tightly within socio-economic conditions that leave first-year writing faculty particularly vulnerable to the lure of this ideal. Interestingly, most of the babies born to women faculty in our program have appeared between May and August, during the summer break. My own scrupulous conception planning, designed to avoid the post-35 decrease in fertility and to maximize the likelihood of giving birth in May in order to avoid losing pay or returning to work sooner than I wanted, left me feeling prey to a subtle but powerful institutional control over my body. Similarly gesturing to what Robin Wilson refers to as "scheduling motherhood," Gerald notes that she will henceforth plan more carefully: "[I]f I am teaching when and if I have a second child, I will try to plan the due date a little better" (185). These impulses to schedule motherhood illustrate a conviction that embodying the ideal academic will remedy some of the ways in which first-year writing faculty remain undervalued, overworked, and underpaid.

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Significantly, as Williams insists, the academic ideal hinges on the supposedly distinct yet symbiotic spheres of the market and domesticity: “[the ideal worker] works fulltime and overtime and takes little or no time off for childbearing or child rearing” (*Unbending 1*). This spheric separation underscores much of *Women’s Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*, by Michelle Ballif, Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford. While several of the nine women academics they feature have children, the authors also acknowledge the many tenured female rhetoric scholars who do not: “As we turn to the difficult subject of balancing work and family obligations, including, especially, the care of children and aging parents, we confront an irony: many of the women scholars in our study do not have children. And neither do we” (175). They go on to suggest that, for many women, this engenders regret: “When we asked our survey participants what they would do differently if they could begin their career over again, we learned that for many, work/life conflicts were a source of deep regret. One wrote, ‘I would try to have more of the normal things in life. It is no accident that I am single and have no children’” (160). While showcasing such regrets might go far in encouraging junior scholars in rhetoric and composition to make different choices, the overarching lesson of the book is that success in our field virtually demands unwavering devotion to the market rather than to domesticity. Jacqueline Jones Royster’s assertion that “There is nothing in any job . . . that would cause me to subvert my commitment to family” offers an anomaly to what is otherwise a bastion of female rhetoric and composition scholars working exceedingly ambitious hours:

Most work at least twelve hours a day, often hours spent in the office away from home. For example, Cynthia L. Selfe arrives at her office each day at around 7:00 am and does not leave until around 7:00 p.m. . . . Cheryl Glenn is at her desk at home around 7:00 am each day and stays there until it is time to teach, late in the afternoon. One summer when she was trying to write a textbook, [Sharon] Crowley began working around the clock. (162)

Most vexing for me is that those involved with first-year writing, a field with a relatively new disciplinary status and a comparatively young workforce, actually have the opportunity to change this system but instead resist or ignore such possibility. As Ms. Mentor has suggested, “only those who somehow get tenure can ever change [academia] and make it more friendly to mothers, children, and the next generation” (120). Joseph Harris’s analogy between contemporary compositionists and Henry James’s unnamed *Turn of the Screw* governess offers a useful illustration of, and possible explanation for, this frustrating trend. In “Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss,” Harris writes, “[The] governess’s identification with a superior social class helps blind her to both her own best interests and

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those of her young charges. She is seduced by her patron and the vision of London, wealth, and refinement that he offers her” (54). In a similar way, Harris maintains that contemporary compositionists, “through our desire to be part of a cultural or critical vanguard” (54), adopt a “narrow vision of professionalism” (54) that precludes what might be a more productive focus on “collective interests and identity” (52). From the context of family and sexuality, this class-conscious, injurious adherence to the ill-fitting ideals of a purportedly superior social class can translate into assumptions that, in order to succeed in—and be accepted into—the academy proper, first-year writing faculty must more strictly adhere to scholarly habits that reflect the highly cerebral, if not celibate, life celebrated for scholars since at least St. Jerome in the fourth century—patron of librarians, schoolchildren, and theology—who lauded governesses who were “older, severe, pale, somber, and melancholy” (qtd. in Renton 1).

Subscribing to Notions of the Ideal Mother

Notions of what constitutes the ideal academic for first-year writing faculty must also be examined in proximity to notions of what constitutes the ideal parent, especially the ideal mother. Judith Warner terms this idealism the “Mommy mystique”:

[The Mommy mystique tells us that we] are the luckiest women in the world . . . we have the knowledge and know-how to make ‘informed decisions’ that will guarantee the successful course of our children’s lives. . . If we choose badly our children will fall prey to countless dangers—from insecure attachment to drugs to kidnapping to a third-rate college. And if this happens . . . we will have no one but ourselves to blame. Because to point fingers out at society, to look beyond ourselves, is to shirk “personal responsibility.” (32-33)

Warner’s description of the ideal, autonomous, educated, personally responsible mother intersects in especially powerful ways with academic women, whose scholarly training also often privileges these characteristics. Sociologist Jean-Anne Sutherland maintains, “mama-guilt can go both ways. As mothers we often feel guilty when we do not perform according to the ideal for good mothers . . . The guilt also kicks in when we feel we are not living up to some ideal of scholar-in-training” (215). Such a propensity for guilt is reflected in the women faculty Venitha Pillay works with: “A striking though not surprising theme that runs through the stories of Sally, Ann and Sue is about feeling guilt. . . . Ann was consumed with guilt about numerous moments in her life and these had obvious impacts on her mothering” (148). And such feelings also underscore the section featuring Patricia Bizzell in Women’s Ways of Making It: “The whole issue of working

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full time and having kids has been very, very vexed for me. That’s been a real source of stress and pain, and I feel very dissatisfied with the way that I worked that out. But I don’t know that I could have done it differently . . . I don’t know another option” (210).16

Although these ideals can impact all parents, first-year writing faculty, especially women, have a particularly complicated relationship with them. Often already striving against formidable odds to meet an ideal version of an academic, first-year writing faculty might find even greater stress in grafting on a desire to be an ideal parent. Moreover, since these faculty may already be defined to a certain degree as maternal, the guilt affiliated with not achieving an idealized version of motherhood can be compounded when one is encouraged by the profession to be an ideal mother figure instead to one’s students.

Self-Doubt

In large part due to experiences such as those described above, nagging questions over my pedagogical efficacy have persisted throughout my pregnancies and subsequently as a mother with young children. Subject to critical gazes, and conscious of pedagogic shifts, I have found myself wondering whether students are taking me seriously as a professor: Does all of this distraction—the increased physical and emotional intimacy with students, a focus on pregnancy (or children), the visibility of the body—get in the way of the so-called real business of the first-year writing classroom?

Such a question is difficult to pose, particularly because it might be misconstrued as an argument for pregnant and parenting faculty not to work in first-year writing, which is decidedly not what I am suggesting. What seems more appropriate, then, to ask is: What does it say about the academic socio-cultural climate toward pregnancy and parenting in first-year writing that seventeen centuries after St. Jerome, I remain vexed by questions about whether my own sexual, pregnant, maternal embodiment in the first-year writing classroom presents a distraction to student learning and academic inquiry? That such a question does persist speaks not so much to my own insecurities, but to a persistent inadequacy regarding the ways in which issues of parenting and pregnancy are approached in many academic settings, particularly for women and particularly in the environment of first-year writing. And, as the next section will show, although some misgivings persist, it has largely been the internal support within our first-year writing program, sponsored by our WPAs and through collegiality among our faculty, that has enabled me to become more confident and comfortable with pregnancy and parenting in the first-year writing classroom.

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Fostering a Family-Friendly Climate for First-Year Writing Faculty

Despite the unique disincentives often facing first-year writing faculty, as well as a lack of full parental-leave policy support, our program, with its ongoing baby trend, offers a valuable opportunity to begin articulating what a family-friendly, socio-cultural climate might look like and how first-year writing faculty and WPAs can foster this climate together.

Advocate for Better Family-Related Policies

Understanding family-related policies at one's institution and sharing that knowledge with colleagues are crucial to creating a family-friendly environment. Although it frequently becomes incumbent on department administrators to locate, read, and translate family-related policies for faculty, many have little interest, or receive little training, in these issues. Because writing programs rely so extensively on adjunct, graduate-student, and postdoctoral faculty, and because so many first-year writing teachers are women and childbearing age, our field holds a particular investment in understanding family-related policies and in helping make any unjust inequities more publicly visible. Ballif, Davis, and Mountford advise tapping in to national networks in order to advocate for continued policy-related improvements: "Find out about nationwide efforts to change institutional structures that impede women faculty from having children. . . . Point administrators toward some of the literature on how to create family-friendly institutional policies" (181-82). Programs filled with individuals who can help navigate through complex policies and who are visibly advocating for better policies create a more receptive climate for pregnancy and parenting.

Redefine the Ideal Academic

While these policy-related efforts are vital, however, the often-contingent status of first-year writing faculty—a status that often excludes them from the most supportive institutional policies—requires supplemental energy in the form of advocating for changing the nature of first-year writing work itself. Our program offers one example in that our employment operates on a full-time basis, largely outside conventional academic hierarchies. Our faculty members teach a manageable load of courses, on multi-year contracts, with competitive salaries and health benefits; since our work is focused around teaching and holds no research expectations, quality gains precedence over quantifiable scholarly output. Importantly, this reflects Perna's call for "institutional leaders [to redefine] the ideal worker to emphasize quality of output rather than quantity of time in-
vested" (21). Suggesting the importance of this shift, my colleague Ben Albers, father of two, suggests that it is in part the “nature of [our] position,” which resists tenure-like expectations, that encourages a self-selection of people interested in achieving “more of a balanced professional and personal scale.” Another structural aspect of our program that helps make it conducive to childbirth and rearing is that faculty can take leaves of absence without expectations of scholarship. We have thus created an on-off system similar to what Sylvia Ann Hewlett calls for: “The career highway as it’s currently constructed has all kinds of ‘off-ramps’ but very little in the way of ‘on-ramps.’ We need to redefine—or reengineer—this highway so that a professional woman can rejoin her career after having taken significant time out” (9).

Obviously, many of these structural elements are particular to the resources and circumstances of our institution. However, the undergirding ideas of accessible on-off ramps and shifting the nature of the ideal academic can manifest in any number of ways. For instance, WPAs might also help redefine the ideal academic by talking about family more often, bringing family members to work more frequently, or including more photographs of children and children’s art in their offices. First-year writing faculty might also produce more scholarship on family-related issues or defend more publicly a publication agenda focused on quality rather than quantity. They might also unapologetically say ‘no’ more often to committee work or conference presentations in order to preserve family time.

Facilitate the Sharing of Strategies for Teaching First-Year Writing while Pregnant

Eichhorn observes that her willingness to invite “a discussion of [her] pregnant body” (376) in the composition classroom afforded her the opportunity to help students resist ingesting androcentric, anti-maternal ideologies: “I wrote my students a letter, where I explained what it meant to me to be a feminist teacher and what it meant to me to be pregnant. Modeling the use of writing as a social practice through this letter, I opened my composition classroom as a space for counterhegemonic critique of the academy and the outside world it represents” (376). Since our program has had so many pregnancies, our faculty have had the unique advantage of being able to share with one another successful strategies for teaching while pregnant. Many of these strategies are hardly unique to pregnancy, but are already established as preferred pedagogical methods in composition. For instance, during the throes of early-pregnancy nausea, Marko created more deliberate mechanisms for student-led seminar discussions. A myriad of possibilities exist for meaningfully integrating the work of first-year writing and pregnancy: one can imagine writing projects focusing on the ethos created when authors
make a choice to vocalize or secret their identities as parents. Alternatively, one might develop writing projects based on children and pathos. Political invocations of parenting, highly visible in the 2008 presidential candidates, might provide another productive line of inquiry. Making just such a link, Gerald notes that she will henceforth “pay more attention to the rhetoric I use with regard to pregnancy” (185).

Additional conversations need to occur among first-year writing faculty that address not only ways of creating structured intersections between the work of first-year writing with pregnancy and parenting, but also more logistical issues, such as the pregnant teacher's clothing, movement around the classroom, verbal volatility (lungs compress during pregnancy), increased kidney functioning, heightened emotional sensitivity due to hormonal fluctuations, the impact of pregnancy and parenting on responding to student texts, designing writing assignments, and structuring a semester, as well as reshaping one's approach to writing and teaching to accommodate more smoothly what often becomes the more compressed and unreliable schedule of life with children.

Given the ongoing presence of these issues and the creative strategies people have used to address them, a WPA might foster the exchange of such ideas in meaningful ways through professional-development opportunities, symposia, or other official venues. We have hosted a variety of professional-development events related to family and academia: one consisted of a panel of nationally recognized scholars speaking about academia and family; another was a multi-disciplinary roundtable discussion led by faculty from across our institution; another was a panel session comprised of our own current and former faculty speaking about their experiences with family and work. WPAs might include literature about family and academia in the program's library, on lists of resources, or even in training sessions. Creating opportunities such as these for professional exchanges helps legitimate the concerns of pregnant and parenting faculty members, increase the self-confidence of faculty in the classroom, and bridge what is at times—despite frequent invocations in our field about "maternal" styles of teaching—a rather large distance between so-called maternal pedagogies and the actual maternity embodied in the first-year writing teacher via pregnancy and parenting.

It Takes a Village: Encourage a Network of Collegiality

What is also significant about our program is the interpersonal camaraderie that has emerged and how this fellowship offers much needed support for academics negotiating scholarship and family. As Albers puts it, “There are lots of people around here to talk babies with.” Faculty in our program regularly note the deep friendships they form with colleagues. One colleague,
Pegeen Reichert Powell, offers the following narrative about her experience becoming a mother in our program:

About three weeks before I began [my position in the writing program], Charlie was born. And we were clueless. We actually thought that the first year we didn't need childcare. We thought we'd work while the baby slept. And, like many academics, we weren't living or working where our extended families were, so we were without that important support network. But this is where our colleagues stepped in. They threw us a baby shower, for which we were very grateful. But then, they proceeded to move us into our first home while we were at the hospital because Charlie decided to arrive the day of our closing . . . Some of them held him in the hospital before his aunts and uncles did. They put up with our complaints of sleep deprivation. They let him crawl around the [offices]. Deb gave him his first haircut. Peter gave him his first spoonful of rice cereal. . . . Joe [our WPA] gave Charlie his first set of Legos and lots of storybooks we still read. We honestly believe that Charlie has grown up pretty well in part because the [writing program faculty] helped raise him those first couple of years.

Echoing Reichert Powell's formulation of this climate, Harms notes that when he announced the upcoming birth of his child, he was at once surrounded by offers from colleagues to cover his classes during the birth and subsequent weeks. Marko asserts that, with an office in a building where three of her colleagues were pregnant and another one had recently adopted, she slowly learned how to think about family and academia together: "I watched all these beautiful pregnant women talking about their babies and saw infants at work, and I began to learn how to think about family and academia together and to practice saying in plain earshot of other academics that I wanted a baby, something I had never been able to vocalize before so publicly in the academy." As I was writing this article, a colleague, newly returned to work after the birth of her daughter, came to my office in tears because she had forgotten her breast pump and felt generally overwhelmed and inadequate as a mother, teacher, and scholar. Although unable to fix her problems, offering her a shared sense of these challenges (and directing her to a nearby drug store that stocks breast pads and hand-held breast pumps) did help alleviate some of her feelings. During my second pregnancy, three of my colleagues were pregnant at the same time: we ate lunch together, went on walks together—our conversations moved smoothly between our fears and anticipations of motherhood, our scholarship, our aches and joys of pregnancy, and our teaching. It was an immeasurably rewarding experience. This year I again quite happily find myself pregnant at the same time as a number of colleagues.

Others who have written about successful experiences with pregnancy, parenting, and academia also invoke this "it takes a village" tenet. Warner,
for example, recalls appreciatively her time as a new mother in France with "a whole unofficial network of people to help and support me—materially and emotionally" (30). Kathleen Jones recounts her experience as a newly divorced mother working toward her Ph.D.:

It only worked because D and C and I, three single women with young children, had created our own little extended family. . . . We rotated sleepovers twice a week so that one night we each had all three kids in exchange for two kidless nights a week. . . . On those nights alone I caught up with lecture notes or seminar papers or organizing or dance classes. Or maybe even a bit of private romance. (178)

While fostering and acknowledging this connectedness between colleagues may not be the exclusive responsibility of the WPA, he or she can certainly enhance it. Our WPA, for example, makes documents available for new faculty regarding child-care options and offers a list of writing-program faculty who have indicated that they are happy to speak with new faculty about the area's child-care options. We sponsor social gatherings frequently throughout the year and post photographs of our faculty and their families around our hallways and on our internal website. Any mechanisms for encouraging faculty camaraderie will help foster this all-important network of communication and support.

Extend Unambiguous Administrative Support

Threaded throughout the suggestions above is the extent to which this family-friendly culture operates amidst sincere administrative support. Once a faculty member has rejoined our program following the arrival of a baby, we have, within our capabilities, created a climate that offers sustained support and encouragement. As indicated earlier, we even installed changing tables in our office restrooms. We changed the times of faculty meetings so they would not interfere with evening hours with family. During my first pregnancy, when I was unexpectedly ordered on bedrest with six weeks remaining in the academic term, my supervisors quickly, and without complaint, made alternative arrangements for my courses and even arranged a phone interview for an internal administrative position for which I was applying (and subsequently received). When Erin Gayton interviewed for our program, she recalls mentioning her son and seeing one of the interviewers smile as an indication that it was fine to talk about babies:

I'd struggled a bit about whether or not this was something I should 'reveal' and my concerns were immediately diffused .... [W]hen I sent an email inquiry about childcare .... I was referred to about four people, all of whom were very helpful. .... Then when we got here, there was the
family-friendly [baseball] game and the faculty picnic where [the WPAs] went out of [their] way to include and celebrate children. It made a big impression that [the program director] seemed so proud of the numbers of babies in the program, wanted to take the picture, etc. For me, these gestures set the tone for the program.

Marko recalls that at her first faculty meeting the WPA indicated in nearly adjoining sentences that people need not hide their job searches and that we were excited about soon welcoming a new baby from one of our colleagues. She was “shocked” to see such a fluid movement between family and work.

While it would probably be rare in 2008 for a department chair to be openly hostile to children and pregnancy, it is also within subtleties that one’s attitude can be most acutely discerned. The administrative gestures mentioned above are for the most part unprompted and relatively minor—a baby-shower gift of Legos, a general impression of pride at a picnic photo, an offhand remark at a meeting. As a point of contrast, one might point to several disapproving subtleties in “Baby, Baby, Baby” by Robin Wilson. Here, Wilson ostensibly praises Ithaca College administrators for productively accommodating pregnancy when three out of nine faculty members in a department announced plans for maternity leave during the winter semester: “Administrators at Ithaca were much more sympathetic than the pregnant women had expected, and more supportive than officials at other colleges have been known to be.” Still, the article’s subtitle identifies the experience as somewhat akin to managing a fatal illness: “Pregnancies test a department’s ability to cope.” And, Wilson closes by reporting the chair’s response to learning of a pregnancy in another department: “This time, Mr. Rowland isn’t concerned. ‘Thankfully, it’s not in my department.’” Thus, with this one pithy sentence, communicating relief at not being again burdened, Rowland reverses much of the positive cultural impact the article might have had.

Granted, Wilson’s relief is to a certain degree justified; he undoubtedly worked hard to accommodate the pregnancies. By the same token, one hopes that Wilson made these accommodations without placing undue, compulsory burden on other faculty in his department. Faculty members who do not have children should certainly not be assumed to be ever-available to fill in for those who do. However, Wilson’s indication of the hardship he endured severely compromises the full potential of the very accommodations he strove so hard to make. To sustain a truly family-friendly programmatic climate, such ambiguity must be routed out and replaced with honest fellowship and unwavering administrative goodwill (at least publicly).

**Conclusion: Why We Need Change**

Making the socio-cultural climate in first-year writing more family friendly is crucial if we hope to foster and maintain the diversity and in-
novation necessary for dynamic composition pedagogy. If scholars in our field take pride in increasing access for students, privileging different writerly perspectives, and continually rethinking best teaching practices, then strengthening our commitment to family-friendliness will open composition classrooms to a wider range of teachers and influence. John W. Curtis insists that “the success of faculty members in balancing their academic careers with family responsibilities is a matter of more than individual happiness: it is also a matter of addressing structural inequities and attracting the most qualified candidates to the academic profession.” Indeed, scholars in numerous fields have offered testimony as to how parenting has reconfigured and strengthened their academic lives: The seminal text *Women’s Ways of Knowing* maintains that maternal authority can enable a woman to see that “[s]he has *experience* that may be valuable to others; she too, can know things” (61). Literary scholar Loretta Holloway insists that “children can supplement our academic existence. My children have forced me to be stronger, nicer, meaner, and pushier than even I thought I could be” (93). Chemist Michelle M. Francl-Donnay contends that playing with her children in puddles enabled her to solve what had been a perplexing research problem: “even quantum chemistry research can be changed—without compromising the results—by my role as a mother” (129).

How, then, might pregnancy and parenting impact the teaching of and writing about first-year writing? Bateson maintains, “It is not unreasonable to suppose that the kind of synergy we associate with the Renaissance man can develop in the lives of men and women who multiply their spheres of sensitivity and caring” (186). In my own experience, pregnancy and motherhood have lent additional awareness to the recursivity involved in the writing process as I witness the recursive, nonlinear advances made by my young children. Gaining strategies from my colleagues for ways of thinking through the complexities of parenting has increased my appreciation for the social collaboration involved in writing, not only in terms of peer review, but also through fostering a meaningful exchange of ideas within the classroom space. Having multiple children has made me more sensitive to different styles of learning in the students with whom I work. Watching and participating in the literacy acquisition of my children has renewed my commitment to include joy in the processes of writing and reading, not only for myself but also for the students with whom I work.

Though difficult to enact and articulate because it in many ways challenges some of academia’s most cherished, deeply rooted ideals, the unique position of first-year writing, situated at the gateway to the academy but also operating outside some of the more deeply entrenched disciplines, offers an opportunity and a responsibility to develop successful models for making pregnancy and parenting more accepted, productive, and integrated within academic work. Doing so offers undergraduates—some of whom will be part
of the next generation of faculty—more synergistic academic role models. Several female undergraduates in Gayton’s first-year writing course expressed appreciation for seeing in her a role model as a woman who could have both career and family. In our program, amidst so many general disincentives and comparative lack of policy coverage, faculty members have found a way to balance academic life and family—fellowship and earnest administrative support. Of course, difficulties persist: we continually work with human resources to clarify policies, we strive to ensure that family friendliness does not inadvertently exclude or burden non-child-bearers and rearers, and we recognize that much of the conversation among parents on our faculty involves the ongoing challenges entailed in negotiating time for teaching, scholarship, and parenting. However, despite these struggles, while so many other first-year writing faculty, like James’s unnamed governess, expend their valuable energy chasing what is for many an ill-fitting, impossible (perhaps even injurious) ideal constructed by others, our first-year writing faculty have actually begun reimagining a new set of—family-inclusive—collective interests and identity.^^

Notes

1. According to the CIA, the July 2009 est. birth rate for Guinea is 37.52/1000 population and for The Gambia is 37.87/1000; the United States has a birth rate of 13.82/1000 population.
2. Please note my intentional use of “first-year writing” instead of “rhetoric and composition” or “composition,” both of which often include more established, well-supported faculty demographics.
3. Duke University, for example, offers full-time regular rank faculty one semester of paid parental leave and full-time non-regular rank faculty only three weeks of paid parental leave.
4. cf. the Introduction to Michelle Ballif, Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford’s Women’s Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition.
5. Despite these strong advances, such scholars as Laura Perna, Mary Ann Mason, and Marc Goulden have argued that policy usage often remains underused.
6. While such perceptions may be shifting, they are still deeply engrained: In the 2007 PMLA, Marc D. Cyr prefers death to composition in “Journey of the MLA Job Candidates”: “Do you want to go all that way / For one lousy interview? / They’ll hire you certainly, / I know your CV and have no doubt. / But there are jobs, and there are Jobs. / … a position teaching five sections of comp? / Tenure-track or not, I’d rather die.”
7. The perceived opposition between pregnancy and intellectualism emerges in extreme in a 21 October 2006 ABC Radio National feature entitled, “Placenta Brain: the cognitive burden of pregnancy?” Here “three academics,” an “artist,” and two “expectant mothers” [note that the expectant mothers are not the academics] engage in the following conversation: “Ever had a case
of 'placenta brain', or 'pregnancy stupidity'? Can carrying a fetus make you drop your cognitive bundle? Expecting women worldwide find themselves suddenly forgetful and absent minded. So why is there so little research into the phenomenon? Are hormones to blame, or the psychological burden of approaching mumhood? Does it have an evolutionary function? Libbi Gorr and others contemplate the hungry placenta.”

8. cf. Elrena Evans’s “Fitting In” or Alissa McElreath’s “That Mommy Thing,” in which “a senior tenured colleague” (89) advised McElreath “to ‘keep up with [her] job’ by publishing and writing, and then said, squeezing [her] hand for extra emphasis, ‘don’t get too caught up in that mommy thing’” (89).

9. cf. Elisabeth Rose Gruner’s “I am Not a Head on a Stick” and Leah Bradshaw’s “The Facts, the Stories,” which concludes with the triptych, “I am a woman. I am a mother. I am a scholar” (122).

10. Ph.D. candidate Tarsha L. Stanley notes a similar experience: “I am so tired of Dr. Y referring to me as ‘the one with the baby’... To learn [my name] isn’t asking too much. ... [W]hen she calls me ‘the one with the baby,’ she says it as if it were some kind of punishment” (85).

11. Whereas non-pregnant faculty can choose what (or whether, or when) to reveal much about their personal status, pregnancy (like gender or race often) largely precludes such freedom. Beleaguered by vomiting, my colleague Marko, revealed her pregnancy earlier than she desired, leaving herself vulnerable to a possible public experience of miscarriage. My colleague Rebecca Vidra, on the other hand, remained silent about her pregnancy early on, but often overheard students whispering about her weight.

12. In “At Home at Work,” Giffen expresses concern about the potential detrimental impact of this assumed heterosexual context: “To what extent was that discourse of heterosexual motherhood and reproduction excluding certain kinds of experiences?” (205).

13. The Foucauldian gaze can also reveal subtle expectations about the public face of first-year writing. In Spring 2006, three of our faculty—all pregnant—volunteered to pose with students for a new web page for prospective students. Ultimately, none of the pictures were published, perhaps for any number of reasons, or perhaps because three pregnant first-year writing faculty might have seemed contrary to public-relations efforts to showcase the desired intellectual tone of university education. The university, we must recall, has historically been the “birther of ideas,” not babies.

14. This ideal is so engrained that even those challenging it often nevertheless suborn it, as in the following by Thomas Schmidt:

When I got my job ... I recognized that maniacal focus was a sine qua non for anyone working toward tenure at a major university these days. So I worked hard. I edited several books and wrote many book chapters, numerous peer-reviewed articles, several lengthy review essays, and innumerable book reviews. I was active in my field at conferences, received good-to-excellent teaching evaluations, and accepted whatever service came along ... I thought I was focused. But I was focused on getting tenure. (C1)
By going on to suggest faculty instead pursue sincere areas of inquiry, Schmidt does little to re-conceive the quantity of productivity so much as the direction of that energy.

15. While there are tenured women in composition studies, such as Lynn Bloom, surfacing the issues surrounding parenting, pregnancy and professing, texts such as *Women's Ways of Making It* will indubitably have more traction than Bloom's ten-page contribution to *Parenting & Professing* or the other column-length pieces routinely appearing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

16. As expectations for shared parenting have increased, so too have expectations about the ideal father. One colleague and father, Erik Harms, remarks, "If I have to come into the office to work at night, every once in a while I feel guilty and worried that if anyone around here sees me working at night or on a weekend they're going to wonder why I'm not at home with my family and think, 'Erik's a bad Dad'."

17. cf. Coiner and George, *The Family Track* and ACE, "An Agenda for Excellence." For a list of specific policy ideas, see Drago, *Striking a Balance*, whose suggestions include government-sponsored “[p]aid family leave. [and] child care financing” (18); he also supports Williams's advocacy for “part-time parity legislation” that would “require that part-time employees receive the same hourly wages as full-timers, along with pro-rated benefits” (Drago 106).

18. I am deeply appreciative of my colleagues in the Duke University Thompson Writing Program, who candidly shared their experiences, agreed to have those ideas published, and offered generous, constructive feedback on the various drafts of this piece.

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