academic mothers; it deprives them of the opportunity to focus on essential parenting responsibilities, and in some cases it means working without pay and/or against medical orders.

Although much of one’s scholarly work cannot be put on hold or performed by another person while on leave, teaching is one part of an academic’s job that might be covered most easily during a leave of absence. Faculty members get released from teaching for various reasons, such as scholarly leaves, for an entire academic term or more. However, parental leaves at U.S. institutions typically are for periods shorter than a semester, and given the unrelenting due dates, faculty who need to take parental leave often encounter complicated logistical challenges in their teaching responsibilities. Our own surveys and interviews revealed that women often teach right up until their children arrived – continually adjusting plans to transfer courses to colleagues, and then jump back into teaching at the end of the semester, after being out of touch with the students and the flow of course material for several weeks. Some had to make their own arrangements to cover their teaching, such as piecing together colleagues to cover classes, which poses an unfair burden to all involved and could foster resentment among colleagues. Some women even report continuing to teach although they are officially on leave – running class from home (in person, by phone, webinar), recording lectures to be played in class, returning to the classroom after a few short weeks or even days. The CFW highlights the discrepancy between traditional leave policies and academic teaching responsibilities: “If departmental coverage of term-long teaching responsibilities is not adequately addressed, traditional sick leave policies may require or pressure women to return to the classroom sooner than the six to eight weeks following childbirth that is considered to be good medical practice.” Aside from the burden to the faculty member “on leave,” these shifts are incredibly disruptive for students’ learning, as reflected in course evaluations. In addition, such piecemeal arrangements pose challenges for substitute instructors, department chairs, and other administrators. By providing semester-long replacements for teaching in their parental leave policies, academic institutions not only help faculty and administrators strike an equitable workload balance, they also benefit students by providing continuity in instruction.

The unique nature of faculty positions and academic work has prompted many institutions to offer family leave policies specifically designed to accommodate faculty work. In cases where parental leave does not cover an entire term, many institutions provide an additional “modified duties” policy for faculty, which releases or reduces their “teaching, research, or service load for a temporary period (usually a term or two) without commensurate reduction in pay,” following the arrival of a new child. Besides addressing the logistical and teaching-continuity issues that affect administrators, replacement instructors, and students, these policies offer a fair workload for faculty members, who typically perform other aspects of their work while officially on parental leave. Indeed, the nature of academic work “makes[s] it difficult for faculty members to use traditional sick or disability leaves. Therefore, modified duties policies...may be seen as equivalent to the six to eight weeks of full-time paid sick leave most universities offer [staff].”

Part II of this series will follow up with recommendations for supportive policies that nurture work-life balance, to the benefit of both faculty and their institutions. Stay tuned!

References

Colleen Conley (cconley@luc.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Loyola University Chicago, and a member of the Society for the Psychology of Women Committee. Much of this two-part column comes from Conley’s work with graduate student collaborator Devin Carey: Conley, C. S., & Carey, D. C. (2010). Academic mothers “on leave” (but on the clock), the line (and off the record): Toward improving parental leave policies and practices. In M. Castañeda & K. Isguro (Fds.) Bearing witness to mothers’ lives in academia: Speaking truth to power to change the ivory tower. Book proposal under consideration. Thanks to the many women in SPW and beyond who shared their experiences for this project. Please contact Colleen to share more, or to get a copy of the book chapter (which contains more information and references).