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By Paul Schrodt

## **The professor who would be "Mommy"**

Claudia Swan's office feels a lot like home. As you walk in, the professor pops up from behind an oversized lamp, fumbling with an orange peel at her cherry-wood desk. She smiles warmly, and it's not until she stands up that you can see the signs of stress on her face: At 44 years old, Swan has had two babies in the last few years, well after the average woman has already birthed her average 2.09 children. Nothing about Swan's life, it turns out, is quite average.

Swan was elected chair of Northwestern's art history department last fall, when she was still nursing her second child, Alexander. "Could I have said no?" she said, "Yes. But there wasn't anybody else in the department to do it." The transition has been straining—she sorts through e-mail only to forget what she was looking for, but keeps smiling. "I'll show you the prize," she says, swiping inkjet printouts of her kids off a filing cabinet. Sure enough, they look like normal little tykes, not neurotic whiz kids: happy, goofy, a little distracted.

Tenure is the only thing that allows Swan to have a family life in the first place, she says. She can, for the most part, say "bye" and leave her office when she wants to. That's not necessarily possible for a rising academic still trying to prove herself. In 2005, officials from 27 major research universities met for a conference on tenure policy sponsored by the Sloan Foundation and the American Council on Education. Though they acknowledged that being a faculty member allows more flexibility than most professions, that's also, paradoxically, part of the problem: Because of the nature of academic research and the lack of a rigid, hourly schedule, the work is never-ending.

Swan puts the problem bluntly: "It's not a 9-to-5 job; it's a kind of 24/7/365 job. When is it not a good time to read the latest publication in my field? When is it not a good time to be writing another article or another book? How do you set the limits on that?"

Every industry faces its own questions about working parents, questions that are necessarily skewed by sex. But in a university system struggling to promote more women, female faculty still lag behind women from other professions in finding a balance between family life and work. According to 2000 Census data, only 18 percent of 32-year-old female faculty members had babies in their households, compared with about 25 percent of female doctors and lawyers of the same age. That puts people like Linda Garton, mother of two and assistant dean in the School of Music, in an awkward position. "We have a female dean right now, but she doesn't have any kids. Not that that's either a

pro or a con, but I try not to let my having kids into conversation,” she said. “I’m kind of playing the university game.”

Northwestern is one of many universities that have responded with policy fixes that attempt to lessen the burden. A professor now has the option of adding another year to her tenure clock when she has a child. But not only is the job of infant care more than a 12-month commitment, a mother who chooses to take a year off might be worse off for doing so. When she comes up for tenure, according to Swan, most of the professors reviewing her file won’t know how to subtract that “lost year,” and she will inevitably be compared against the work of peers who either don’t have kids or aren’t the ones taking care of them.

This double bind suggests the deeper setback for women working at NU: They’re part of a system that has functioned for years without their benefit. Swan received her Ph.D. from Columbia 10 years ago, studying under an advisory committee of five men, not one of whom ever mentioned or made reference to the fact that the years in which she wrote her dissertation coincided with the years during which most women bear children. The one or two friends she knew who did have kids fell out of the career track as a result. “It was just sort of assumed that if you chose to go to graduate school, you chose not to have a family,” she says. “And it wasn’t even that the two things were in conflict – it was just one or the other.”

There are signs everywhere that Northwestern is trying to change things. Last fall, a string of press releases announced the opening of a new nursing room on the Chicago campus, the expansion of a partnership with KinderCare in the city, and workshops and free memberships to **SitterCity.com** to help employees find childcare services. With the exception of the Web site and the workshops, though, these resources aren’t available to faculty in Evanston, which the provost’s office largely attributes to spacing and zoning concerns – the Chicago facilities are centralized, whereas the Evanston ones are sprawling.

These problems are nothing new. When Professor Katherine Faber chaired a committee on childcare back in 2002, the biggest concern among parents on the Evanston campus was the same: the need for on-site childcare. Six years later, that wish remains unfulfilled. In its place, the committee – which was organized thanks to a push from various faculty groups – forged a partnership with the local YMCA and initiated several financial benefits for staff with kids. “While we’re trying to figure out what to do long-term, we’ve had these interim measures I guess,” said Jean Shedd, the associate provost in charge of budget and facilities since 1999.

Shedd is purposefully vague about any plans to establish childcare on campus, though that is the office’s ostensible goal. “What do you think it should look like?” she asked. There are many questions about space, exact location and how to serve everyone’s needs. A lot of people are placing their hopes in the Roycemore private school adjacent to North Campus, which will be turned over to Northwestern after its lease ends in 2014. But even

that presents its own problems, she said, since a site on one end of campus may raise the ire of humanities professors on the other end.

For the most part, professors have found their own alternative childcare resources. Rumors have circulated around campus that the YMCA's daycare had high employee turnover, and Garton said the place gave her the wrong "feeling" when she visited it a few years ago. She said that the teacher-to-student ratio was acceptable but not great, and "it didn't look like they were loving what they were doing when I walked in." Though the Y's daycare has since been reworked and reaccredited, as Shedd said, "once your good name is lost, it's lost forever." Tonica Player, one of the teachers at the McGaw YMCA, says the daycare's credential requirements – which bring in a lot of working students who quickly move onto something else – explain the turnaround.

Swan and her software-architect husband spend \$18,000 a year on a toddler program at a Montessori school in Evanston, though when you add up the costs of nanny care it can easily become more expensive than that. Thanks to a tip from an Evanston neighbor, she also tapped into a Theta sorority listserv that links parents on campus with students who like to babysit on the side. When Swan sent out her first message to Theta asking about availability, she received eight responses in five minutes. "All this time I've been making fun of sorority girls," she says, "and it's incredible – it's this great resource. I'm sure you would also have students like that, say if there was an onsite childcare center, who could work there for like four hours a day."

What may be most telling, though, is the change in the way Northwestern faculty members look at children, parents and women in the first place. Garton, who's only 36, is the ideal image of a young mom working on campus: After her two toddlers roust her out of bed each morning at seven o' clock, she hangs out with them until they're dropped off at the Tot Learning Center in Skokie and gets to the office by 9:45. That's the way it's always been. "My daughter doesn't even say bye to me in the morning," she says. "They've both been in daycare since they were six or seven or eight weeks old."

Garton leaves work for the office and family for home. On the off chance that she needs to attend an eight or nine o' clock meeting, she'll drop off her kids earlier. On several occasions the dean of the music school has told her, "Oh, I know you have kids – you don't have to do this."

But even in Garton's case, there are choices to be made and traps to fall in. As Swan says, "it's not so much juggling as dropping balls selectively." For example, the music school opens at 8:30 in the morning, but Garton gets there at least an hour late every day. Luckily, there aren't many undergraduate students asking to make appointments at 9 o' clock, but then again, Garton says she's more interested in doing the job she has now than climbing the ladder of academia. Right now, that works fine – but things can change. "The university can do all this great publicity stuff, and if the people around me aren't supportive, it's not going to make any difference," she says. "If the people around me didn't want me to be doing this, they'd tell me and I'd be out of here."

And yet it would be hard to call Garton or Swan unsuccessful, either as parents or as academics. A professorship, like motherhood, may be more than a full-time job, but people find a way to work it out. Why they do it is obvious – they chose to – but the better question is how.

“You know what the answer to your question is?” Swan looked up from her mounds of paperwork. She smiled again. “It’s impossible.”