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Mothers' Ways of Making It—or Making Do?: Making (Over) Academic Lives in Rhetoric and Composition with Children

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Mothers' Ways of Making It—or Making Do?: Making (Over) Academic Lives In Rhetoric and Composition with Children

Christine Peters Cucciarre, Deborah E. Morris, Lee Nickoson, Kim Hensley Owens, and Mary P. Sheridan

This article focuses on five women's experiences "making it" as rhetoricians with children. Expanding the definition of success Michelle Ballif, Diane Davis and Roxanne Mountford set forth in *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*, the article offers suggestions for moving toward more family-friendly academic structures, not least by recognizing that the seemingly individualistic idea of choice—such as the choice to have children—rests uneasily with the often invisible structures that shape and delimit choices. The authors call for increased visibility of and acceptance for a greater range of possibilities for "making it" in the field today.

This article, a hybrid of academic and personal prose, gives voice to the experiences of a varied group of women rhetoricians with children. We read Michelle Ballif, Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford's *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition* and found their definition of success generally skewed toward Research I schools and toward women without children.¹ We think there are more ways of "making it," and more women "making it" with children, than that focus makes visible. Here, then, we widen the lens by describing our ways of meeting or exceeding professional expectations as academics who are also mothers. As a group, we are able-bodied, white, straight academic women with children whose experiences have varied considerably. Our range is not exhaustive, but includes being a single, adoptive parent on the tenure track, being a returning graduate student with nearly-grown children, and being securely tenured with school-age children. Three of us had children while we were graduate students; two of us experienced the job market as nursing mothers. One of us eschewed a tenure-track path to focus on teaching and her child, a decision that both delights and haunts her. We haven't had the same paths; we haven't made the same choices; we have, however, each confronted the notion of succeeding as a faculty member and together and separately have come to see that the definition offered in *Women's Ways of Making It*, which at present speaks for our field, requires expansion.

What follows, then, is a series of reflections—narratives of our individual experiences contextualized within research on work-life balance in academia. Although it is unlikely any of us would say we have mastered the work-life

balance (if such a mastery is even possible), as mothers we can agree that care-giving responsibilities—perhaps particularly for young children—make the sum of the work-life (im)balances reflected in *Women's Ways* unlikely models. Several profiled scholars mention twelve-hour work days and/or seven-day work weeks, practices which are generally unsustainable—and undesirable—for mothers of young children. Consequently, we offer these snapshots with hope that they might help broaden the range of possibilities of how we achieve work-life balance as Rhetoric and Composition scholar-teachers in the field today.

Finding A Way: Achieving (Moments of) Life-Work Balance

Lee Nickoson

Ballif, Davis, and Mountford describe the aim of *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition* as telling the myriad stories of women faculty who have achieved public notoriety for their contributions to the field—women rhetoricians singled out as examples of successful teacher-scholars—as “models for other women in the profession who aspire to ‘make it,’ too: to succeed as women academics in a sea of gender and disciplinary bias and to have a life, as well” (3). Reading this statement of purpose left me wondering about all sorts of things: what do the authors and the 142 women who responded to the survey on which their discussion is grounded consider to be professional success? How do these many women colleagues understand—and how have they experienced and successfully (or not) navigated the waters of—disciplinary subjectivities? Is there any correlation between any of our various subject positions as women in the field (rank, type of home institution, race, gender, age, etc.) and how we understand and enact the work-life balance? I found myself most eager to learn more about the status of women in the field and, in so doing, to perhaps learn more about how and where I fit.

I had many epiphanic moments while reading *Women's Ways of Making It*. I found myself attaching Post-it after Post-it to pages where I wanted to come back and spend more time considering particular findings. The most profound insight I gleaned from Ballif, Davis, and Mountford's discussion, though, came early in a chapter aptly titled “Searching for Well-Being: Strategies for Having a Life.” In it, the authors argue that we need to redirect our energies and, rather than asking “How can I have a life while doing this job?” they posit that women faculty who reported feeling a sense of satisfaction in their lives instead ask, “How can I find a balance that sustains me?” (165).

Balance. *Women's Ways* concludes with narrative profiles of nine Rhetoric and Composition scholars whom survey respondents identified as repre-

senting women who have made it. One of those profiled, Lynn Worsham, describes her effort to achieve balance. "Balance," Worsham comments,

is an ongoing process; sometimes you have more and sometimes you have less. It's important to know what is necessary to your well-being and to your sense of yourself, what your limits are, and how to say no. 'Having a life' or finding balance requires that you know at least these three things. (317)

For me, that balance involves the professional and the personal, which I find translates to: teaching, advising, and mentoring both undergraduate and graduate students; engaging various short- and longer-term research scholarly projects; and participating thoughtfully and as fully as possible as a member of my department, college, university, and disciplinary communities. And, for me, the personal translates to parenting my daughter, participating as a member of my church and local community, and sustaining and growing my relationships with family and friends. As far as achieving balance, I feel I am and likely will be for some time a work in progress, which I find is one of the lead challenges of the balancing act—the realization that balance is not, and cannot be, a once-and-forever static experience. Rather, I understand achieving balance as an effort to inhabit a state of mental and emotional equilibrium—an attempt to achieve steadiness of mind and soul. I've come to know that I can't always maintain that equilibrium, and that that is okay. Rather, I experience blissful, contented moments of balance, and it's those moments, I find, that energize and sustain me. The challenge for me, then, becomes finding ways to experience those moments of steadiness as often and as fully as possible.

Some moments of equilibrium, I've learned, can be anticipated, such as those short periods of time when my five-year-old Olivia and I walk across campus on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons when we make the short trek from the car to the university's laboratory preschool. Those ten-minute walks are a highlight of my week. They serve as regular and yet powerful reminders of how fortunate I am—fortunate to have a job in such dire economic times, let alone enjoy a career in the profession I have, since I was young, wanted to join. And now I have the opportunity to share that part of my life—my self—with my daughter. We have some of our best conversations during those short walks, too: I learn about her day, and, if I'm lucky, I might get to hear her sing the university fight song once, twice, or ten times. Most importantly, though, I find our walks are moments in which we get to be in each other's public lives—we get to experience life on a university campus together. I spend the time between when I drop Olivia at preschool and when I pick her up three hours later one building away at the union. If all goes well and it is not too crowded, I settle into at a small corner table at Starbucks. I try my best to make the most of what have be-

come sacred three-hour blocks of work time. I look forward to them. I plan in advance. And I strive to make the work sessions as productive as possible. So that, when Olivia asks me on the return walk to the car what I did at school, I can tell her: I responded to student projects; I worked on an article; I read. And, in return, Olivia will share the details of her school day.

Women's Ways presents much helpful advice, encouraging women in the field to seek out "stars" and star programs in graduate school, to find and build mentor/mentee relationships, to publish, be collegial, to stay true to and be good to yourself. As a parent of a young child, I couldn't help but notice how this advice reflects similar conversations Olivia and I have. We talk about what it means to be a student and the importance of modeling behavior after respected mentors/teachers. We talk about what it means to be fully present in class and about ways to be a good classmate to her peers. Our return walks across campus after her school day (and my power work sessions) often revolve around animated discussions of the new experiences of the day and how those moments leave her feeling good, not only about learning, but also about herself. In other words, I believe the suggestions Ballif, Davis, and Mountford offer are good practical advice for learners at any level.

Other moments of balance, I find, are less expected or routine than my campus walks with Olivia. My collaboration on this article is one such example. As someone in the fifth of her six-year probationary period as tenure-track faculty, my decision to devote time and scholarly attention to *Women's Ways of Making It*—a book that, as thought-provoking as it is, has no visible impact on my research agenda (no direct mention of writing assessment, qualitative research methodology or composition pedagogy) is both new and, I feel, a professional risk for me. After all, I could (or should?) allocate my energies to projects that more easily and deliberately identify with dominant scholarly conversations. Echoing the sentiments of the book, many established scholars would argue that mine was not the wisest tactical decision for any pre-tenure faculty to make, and yet I've found Ballif, Davis, and Mountford's study—in particular, of thinking through how I understand professional success in Composition and Rhetoric—has allowed me opportunities to connect with various colleagues and friends as we've chatted about their conceptions of success. It's in those moments of connection, whether with colleagues, friends, or on my walks with Olivia, that I find balance.

But, as the authors make clear, damaging professional, disciplinary imbalances continue to persist: powerful and destructive imbalances of power, access, expectation, opportunity, reward, and so on. For example, Ballif, Davis, and Mountford note that their survey findings focus on women who reported holding tenured or tenure-track positions, which they acknowledge represents only twenty percent of all women compositionists.

I suggest we build on the conversation *Women's Ways of Making It* skillfully introduces by turning our attention to better understanding how various other populations conceive of work-life balance, and how our colleagues—graduate students; part-time and full-time, non-tenure-track instructors; male as well as female colleagues variously positioned both within and beyond the academy—conceive of, aspire to, and feel constrained by perceived notions of professional success. There are many ways to make it, of course, of imagining, living, and understanding “it.” For me, professional and, yes, personal fulfillment is bound to issues of locating and inhabiting a feeling of balance; however, it is we who go about the task of distributing our time, energy, and passions. I see our collective charge, then, as creating a disciplinary environment in which we feel more of a sense of control over the choices available to us, however we are positioned or identified. We need to be good to ourselves.

Making it as “Just an Adjunct”: an “Other” Perspective

Deborah E. Morris

Like Lee, I see balance as complex and highly personal. As a teacher, researcher, student, and mom, my life is a complex intermingling of these seemingly diverse aspects of self; no single aspect fully represents who I am, and no position, title, or label fully defines me. So when I picked up *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*, I was both excited and expectant of what I would read in the text whose very title seemed to imply inclusivity within a diverse field. I read many helpful hints and interesting scholar profiles, but I didn't find myself represented within the pages. I realize I may not be the typical woman scholar as some conceive of her—after all, I embody multiple oft-ignored positions or perspectives, like adjunct, doctoral student, and mom—yet I was surprised as I read to find myself amongst those others, those beyond the scope of attention of the text; the text's clear and simplistic focus on tenure as the pinnacle of professional achievement in the field further frustrated me. Where was the complexity of identity (and, subsequently, of balance) that I, and many others like me, recognize in the ways that the various aspects of one's self connect, overlap, enrich, and sometimes seem to contradict each other in everyday life? I began to wonder, *why can't our field's notions of faculty success include scholar-mothers and long-term commitments to teaching and research in non-tenured or part-time positions? Does the tenure-only model truly represent our field in the twenty-first century?*

Though Ballif, Davis, and Mountford's text gives little attention to the largely female, non-tenured segment of the field's workforce, a group that Eileen E. Schell has likened to an “army of labor” (qtd. on 3), the NCTE does discuss disparities in the field in a recently revised position statement:

“[p]art-time and adjunct position are disproportionately occupied by women, who hold 39 percent of all faculty positions and 33 percent of full-time positions, but 47 percent of part-time positions” (sec. 1, par. 9). In a 2008 article, a college administrator suggests that colleges are responsible for creating structural imbalances (an idea later discussed by Mary P): “colleges—champions of diversity—have created not only a two-tier system, but one in which adjuncts (who are likely to be female) are more likely to work longer hours for smaller paychecks than another group, tenured faculty members, who are likely to be male” (Jaschik, “Call to Arms”). Sadly, contingent faculty members (like myself) are often dismissed as being “just adjuncts” or “para-professionals” by those within the university, regardless of their educational training, scholarship, creative pedagogies, and dedication to their students and to their university community. And yet, NCTE recognizes that “part-time appointments represent positive options for flexibility in the academic career paths in higher education for many talented and highly qualified individuals” while also acknowledging “the incompatibility that some members of the academic community feel between the intense demands of the traditional tenure-track academic career and their family obligations” (sec. 1, par. 12). Interestingly, doctoral students now may be “rejecting the academic fast track” in favor of pursuing jobs at more “family friendly” campuses, according to a 2009 *Inside Higher Ed* piece. In order to have more flexibility and a better work-life balance, students are choosing careers at teaching-oriented colleges (Jaschik, “Rejecting”). This desired flexibility is found most often in non-tenure-track positions (as discussed later by Christine) or in adjunct positions (as discussed later in this section).

I realize that my personal and professional choices have not necessarily followed Ballif, Davis, and Mountford’s suggestions for success. I chose to stay home with my children in the early 1990s when most women with degrees were heading into the workplace. I needed to be the one who encouraged their learning and imagining throughout the day, and I have precious memories of the joys and trials of mothering during those early years. When my children entered middle school and I was nearing age forty, I returned to school. I was the oldest student in all of my graduate classes and one of the few with children. I scheduled my classes around my children’s school and extracurricular activities, and we often did homework around the dining room table with all three of us working on our respective coursework. I rarely got as much sleep as I would have liked, but the schedule worked for us. And during that time, I learned the value of mentoring. Throughout my MA studies, a strong woman scholar/researcher challenged me in the classroom and provided additional outside support and guidance. I still treasure Dr. Avon Crismore’s encouraging words: “If you set your mind to it, you can accomplish anything!”

When I chose to pursue my PhD at an out-of-state school, a well-meaning graduate advisor said I couldn’t possibly commute that far to complete my

degree. I set out to prove him wrong. Moving wasn't an option, but neither would I settle for a program that didn't meet my academic needs. My chosen program was willing to work with me, and I have commuted for the past four years, usually taking only one course a semester. So, on one evening each week I have made the more than two-hour drive, participated in a three-hour seminar, and then driven home. In good weather, drive time and class time combined for a long, tiring day that often didn't end until midnight. This past spring I took two courses on back-to-back days, a schedule that required a hotel stay one night each week. Weather and road conditions still occasionally created other challenges, but the long academic road has had benefits, too, like being able to focus intensely within individual courses and being introduced to interesting new topics through interactions with several "waves" of beginning scholars.

As I enter the third year of my degree work, coursework is completed. I am preparing for preliminary exams and beginning the formal planning for my dissertation. My older son is a college junior and his younger brother began college this fall as a freshman. Life is changing, but the ability that made me something of a legend amongst family, friends, and peers—the ability to balance home, work, and school in wildly creative ways—remains. Time, after all, is a valuable commodity. As mother and scholar, I attempt organization, efficiency, and balance in all areas of life.

So, rather than teach out-of-state, I choose to teach several days a week at a community college near my home. As an adjunct instructor, I am paid only for contact hours in the classroom, yet I also maintain one or two office hours and interact with my student writers via e-mail throughout the week as well. I share an office with several dozen adjuncts from numerous departments, so I meet with students in the commons area, a space that is rarely quiet and often chaotic at best, but we make it work. Mentoring is also an important aspect of my teaching, especially with a diverse student population that includes many returning adult students, ESL/ELL/ENL students, and young single mothers. My investments of time and energy may not be reflected in my paycheck, but they are reflected in the successes of my students. And, I am keenly aware that I am choosing to make a positive difference at an institutional setting that many in academia might not see as at the epicenter of our disciplinary identity as writing scholars.

Interestingly, NCTE seems to understand that adjunct faculty "teach because they like to teach, because they want to make a contribution to the education of students, . . . and because they enjoy affiliation with our universities" (sec. 1, par. 11). Sadly, some university colleagues still fail to see non-tenure or adjunct positions as real jobs. In spite of this mindset, Maria Shine Stewart reminds that "[t]eaching without tenure is respectable work, even if it is not respected by all." I agree. I find joy in my teaching. I am excited about my studies and research. I am enjoying a new stage of

parenting. My choices and my priorities as teacher, scholar, student, and mom reflect the complex intermingling of these aspects of self. And as an active member of a growing field that consists of gifted scholars within various academic settings and life stages, I wonder, isn't it time that we begin to recognize, support, and celebrate each others' choices—whether on or off the tenure-track? Perhaps "Women's Lives in the Profession Project," a newly-launched venture by the CCCC's subcommittee of the Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession will provide the necessary impetus for change within the field (see Conclusion for more about this project). After all, if we truly are to make-over academic lives, then we must encourage all scholars to live, learn, and teach from within those intermingling aspects of self that make us who we are and, ultimately, that allow us to "make it" in our own ways.

Making It in a "Different" Yet Ubiquitous Way: Non-Tenure Track

Christine Peters Cucciarre

In my copy of *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*, page three is full of scribbles and pen marks with large swooping circles all encompassed by one big box outlining the entire page. Although many of my annotations look similar, these are not my marks. This is the work of my three-year-old son. Although I felt guilty for leaving the book out and mildly irritated that he defaced one of my texts, the scrawlings reveal emotions that I felt often while reading this book.

Despite all the useful career advice this book provides, I finished it feeling a strange cocktail of shame and guilt. The undercurrent to the work of Ballif, Davis, and Mountford is that women who are successful in *Rhetoric and Composition* have to be published, well-known, and tenured. The text also recommends that women support one another and advocate for equal position, status, and pay. My current position subverts just about all of those things regarding women and the field of *Rhetoric and Composition*. My son's use of *Women's Ways* illustrates how I feel the text defaces the clear and justified choices women make when creating success for themselves in our field.

The book restricts the possibilities of being a successful academic in a number of ways. And if I believe those restrictions, I am woefully unsuccessful. First, the book left me out. I am in a non-tenure-track position. It is ironic that this book champions women as a minority in a field where we are hardly the minority, but yet "is in no way meant to ignore the number of women in non-tenure-track or non-tenured positions or part-time positions across the country who represent approximately 80 percent of those teaching writing" (Ballif, Davis, and Mountford 3). If eighty percent of women

teaching writing are left out of the discussion, shouldn't the title of the text be *Less Than One Fourth of Women and Their Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*? Second, it shows how I've sabotaged our field. I am a continuing non-tenure-track (CNTT) faculty member at a doctoral-granting university. Although my position has parity with tenure-track positions in salary, benefits, and voting rights, I feel partially responsible for all that "we" are working against in a field that often struggles for respect by choosing to sign a non-tenure-track contract. Third, the book suggests that I've hurt women in our field because I am a woman who signed a non-tenure-track contract further undermining women in that already marginalized discipline of Rhetoric and Composition.

And yet, I am thankful that I have a job. So many of those I graduated with don't and won't as the economic situation continues to dim. Let's face it, many of us don't have a lot of employment opportunities to choose from. The options for recent graduates are meager and those of us who are employed cannot be faulted for, well, being happy about it. My teaching, my son, my field, my department, and my university all bring me much joy. But when I reflect on the situation critically, there are moments in my thinking, coupled with a visceral twinge in my gut that suggest I'm undermining the principles that are embedded in my hope for women and my hope for the field of Rhetoric and Composition. *Women's Ways* validates those unsettling feelings. Before reading it, I kept my non-tenure-track status on the down low. When people ask me if I'm tenure-track, I'll often avoid the question by saying, "I'll probably be promoted by my sixth year." When I read in the 2007 MLA and ADE report, "Education in the Balance," that "the concept of a non-tenure track faculty is an illegitimate exercise of institutional authority; it is, and it ought to be, contested by whatever means available," (15) my heart stiffens. The report softens the claim by saying that they recognize the trend's origins, but the report, nevertheless, makes me feel as if I've made some sort of Faustian deal. The MLA and ADE are certainly making their case for the equity and security of employment. But the truth is, the division is still hierarchical. The English department at my university promotes non-tenure equity even though I sometimes feel like an outsider during faculty meetings. The salary, the benefits, promotion, class choices, and almost all of the perks are equal with tenure-track positions. The biggest difference is that for continuing, non-tenure-track faculty, teaching comes first. Still, the university expects publication and professional activity in order to get promoted, but teaching is the main focus. Teaching college students is why I became a professor, so I like this arrangement. Yet, I know that research energizes my teaching, so I'm just as enthusiastic about my work outside of the classroom. I control the pace of my writing and publication; the deadlines are mine, not the university's. I can choose to put my students before my research and yet still easily intertwine the two.

I chose Composition and Rhetoric as a field for similar reasons. There's a practicality to the field that favors pedagogy, and an authenticity to the people in it, although many see those values as weaknesses. Gebhardt and Gebhardt say in *Academic Advancement in Composition Studies*, "Some in English studies continue to see Composition Studies faculty as a sort of fringe group engaged in practical—and so less worthy—efforts of scholarship and teaching" (8), another reason I often feel awkward in faculty meetings. I worry that in accepting my job I have forwarded the utilitarian nature of our field. For at least two decades, the literature has suggested that the constant battle of teaching and research will dissolve as the meaning of scholarship expands to include what we do in the classroom. And then there was, and continues to be, talk about universities moving away from the current culture of tenure, the kind of tenure Ballif, Davis, and Mountford seem to be sponsoring. These were all signs that the professoriate was moving away from the "publish or perish" ethos. Universities are indeed moving away from the current culture emphasizing researching and publishing, but the direction of the movement is questionable. My institution's current hiring rate is 3 to 1, non-tenure track to tenure track. The 2007 MLA-ADE report says that their survey of English departments across the United States shows that the ratio is even higher: 7 to 1 (9). Clearly, the divide is widening, not converging. According to the AAUP's report, "Tenure and Teaching-Intensive Appointments (2010)," "The tenure system was designed as a big tent, aiming to unite a faculty of tremendously diverse interests within a system of common professional values, standards, and mutual responsibilities." It also says that "By 2007, however, almost 70 percent of faculty members were employed off the tenure track." The MLA-ADE report confirms these numbers for English departments; it maintains that "only 32% of faculty members in English . . . hold tenured or tenure-track positions" (4). If we look at these numbers while considering sub-disciplines and gender, we know that in Rhetoric and Composition the percentages are probably even higher. A lot of us are not "making it."

Women's Ways of Making It doesn't represent this significant percentage of women teaching in the field. In fact, it represents and surveys very few. Of the 142 respondents, only 14 hold non-tenure-track appointments. Furthermore, when discussing balance and family, Ballif, Davis, and Mountford say, "we confront an irony: many of the women scholars in our study do not have children. And neither do we" (175). The back cover of their text says "this volume provides strategies for a newer generation of scholars entering the field and, in so doing, broadens the support base for women in the field by connecting them with a greater web of women in the profession." The greater web is very small. Ballif, Davis, and Mountford refer to Mason and Goulden's 2002 article, "Do Babies Matter?" and point out that "a full 62 percent of tenured women in the humanities and social sciences were without

children, while only 39 percent of tenured men in the same disciplines were without children.” But then Ballif, Davis, and Mountford note, “Importantly, the baby gap evaporates when women in non-tenure-track positions are included in the study. Women in these positions were more likely to have children” (180). This distinction is troublesome. The point Ballif, Davis, and Mountford seem to be making is that children and tenure are seemingly not compatible. But their highlight also suggests that non-tenure and children *are* compatible, further hinting that those whose main responsibility is to teach have it much easier than others.

When discussing *Women's Ways* with other women at a recent composition conference, several women admitted to me that they too grapple with these conflicts. They feel guilty and haven't openly discussed the consequences of their (our) decisions. It is time to stop feeling guilty and to vocally interrogate scholarship that fails to show the very wide spectrum of women who contribute to the field, even if those who write that scholarship are rarely in that wide spectrum. Perhaps we, in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, should stop looking at the old model of tenure and success and create some new category that is equally respected. We should choose to overwrite the book much in the way my son did on page three. His messy, but I'm sure satisfying, work illustrates the ambiguous nature of success and the many choices we all make to feel that sort of satisfaction. Especially in the current economic crisis, our critical outlook on our professional choices, our field, and our gender might be better used to promote the women in our discipline who “make it” by the thousands of students we teach and mentor each semester.

Making It Work: Balancing “Making Do” with “Making It”

Kim Hensley Owens

Like Christine and Mary P, I became a mother in graduate school, a development my mentors accepted and embraced. I did not, like Deborah, opt to stay home until my kids were mostly grown; my path is one in which mothering young children, teaching, and publishing coexist on the tenure track, and so, like Lee, I, too, perpetually seek balance. When I read *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*, I was in my second year on the tenure track, pregnant with my second child. While grateful for the profiles and advice offered in the book, I came away wanting more. I wanted more definitions of “making it” and more information about and acknowledgment of the lives of academics—particularly tenure-track academics—who are also newish mothers. At that time, with one child, teaching two or three classes a semester, and with a steady publication rate, more days than not I felt like I was making it. Other days were more like making do. Since adding

my second child to the mix last year, “making do” days have outnumbered “making it” days, but I’m slowly figuring out how to make it again, and how “making do” can be all right, too.

To give readers a glimpse into my academic life as a mother, I offer a few verbal snapshots—moving chronologically from the job market to life as a faculty member. I can share these details, in part, because of the rising awareness and interest in the issues academic mothers face lately. Several *Chronicle of Higher Education* articles (see Gallagher and Trower; Kittelstrom; Wilson) and a number of books and edited collections have explored issues of motherhood and work (see Evans and Grant; Mason and Ekman; Podnieks and O’Reilly), publications that begin the conversation we extend here. I may not share Kittelstrom’s opinion that we mothers should include the time spent growing, bearing, and nursing children on our *vitas*, but I do take to heart her point that this time is roughly equivalent to that spent researching and writing the typical academic book. Work-family researchers Robert Drago and Carol Colbeck have found that academic mothers try to avoid mother-bias by either attempting to “improve work performance at the expense of family commitments” or by trying to “hide or minimize family commitments to maintain the appearance of ideal worker performance.” And yet neither of these bias-avoidance strategies seems to benefit academic mothers, academia, or the larger society, and neither works to alleviate the silences. We need institutional and systemic change to better integrate and support academic mothers, and with its large number of female faculty in positions of power, Rhetoric and Composition seems a particularly well-positioned field to begin to make that change. One way to move toward change is to share our choices and experiences. I hope by sharing some of mine, I can help make academic motherhood more doable for others. This is not to say I have it all figured out—I don’t—but the more stories, experiences, and possibilities are out there, the better we can collectively work to make mothering and an academic career compatible enterprises.

I had my first child while writing my dissertation and went on the market while learning to care for my infant. I wrote job query letters with the baby on my lap, worked on writing samples while he napped, and filled out online applications while he grinned at me from a bouncy seat. But once I reached the interview stage, combining new motherhood with the job quest became more challenging. As Mary P. will describe, too, for a nursing mother campus visits present highly specific and infrequently discussed physical challenges. In my case, with visits scheduled somewhat abruptly—some with only a few days’ notice—providing enough milk in advance became a fairly constant concern. I pumped whenever I could, often late into the night. I had to ask each search committee to arrange regular breaks and a private space for me to pump while on my visit—a request that obviously revealed my status as a mother, opening myself to possible mother-discrimination. I’m happy to

report that most search committees were very accommodating of my needs as a nursing mother, which included a one-night stay, regularly scheduled breaks, and private spaces in which to pump.²

As part of my job acceptance, I thought I had negotiated a semester without teaching responsibilities when my second child came along—a sort of unofficial maternity leave via an alternate workload. But when the time came, fuzzy wording and a crashed economy had changed that scenario. Perhaps based on the experience of mothers at a few progressive research-extensive schools, there seems to be a perception that a semester release from teaching and an extra year on the tenure clock are typical in academia—they're not. One school I visited offers new mothers only two weeks of paid maternity leave. (While all new parents are permitted twelve weeks of *unpaid* leave through FMLA, few American families, particularly in this time of economic insecurity, can absorb three months with no paycheck: FMLA secures employment, but not solvency, during maternity leave.) With the help of a chair who is also a mother, in my first semester as a new-again mom I ended up teaching only one class, a graduate seminar. With course releases for administrative work and research, my workload wasn't "light," but it was flexible, and that was essential.

The following semester, I taught three classes plus had administrative responsibilities, but my chair arranged for two of those to be online classes. (Online courses on our campus are typically taught as an "overload" rather than "in-load" assignment.) The flexibility of that schedule enabled me to have only part-time daycare, with a few babysitters for semi-regular events like faculty meetings and PhD exams. This schedule allowed me to teach and write around my daughter's ever-changing nursing and sleeping schedule, and it almost made childcare affordable. I was lucky. In any economic climate, it may be impossible for universities to automatically provide teaching releases to all new mothers, but women should be made aware that they can arrange more-flexible schedules, and that these are best articulated in writing, rather than counting on individually negotiated, often tenuous, oral "deals."

Having children has forced me—or freed me—to focus super-intensely on work when I do have childcare. Most of my teaching, advising, research, and writing happens in those paid-for sessions, and in a few stolen moments during naps and *Sesame Street*. Sometimes I think about all the work I could complete, and how quickly I could complete it, if I didn't have quite so many family responsibilities; just as quickly, though, I realize how much life I would miss if I let work fill every moment of it (and we all know how easily academic work could). I also find that being needed by and allowing myself to focus on family at home means I work better when I am at work than if I hadn't taken that time. Being a mother, in other words, forces a life

balance that in many ways benefits, rather than hinders, my work, insofar as I've had the flexibility to make that possible.

There are definitely days when I'm only making do. When I gave my talk at the 2009 Feminism(s) & Rhetoric(s) Conference, I had my then four-month-old baby with me. I had arranged for someone to hold the baby during my talk in another room; she hadn't shown up. But a sudden onset of separation anxiety would have made passing her off a challenge anyway. At the start of the session, my daughter was napping in a front carrier. We panelists agreed that I should speak first, in hopes she'd remain asleep. Alas, she awoke, wiggly, hungry, and angry, two minutes into my twenty-minute talk, so I gave my talk bouncing her in my arms. People in the audience didn't seem surprised—they even seemed sort of impressed. But for me it was not an impressive moment—I felt desperate. It was my third day of being at a conference with a baby; I'd rarely been more exhausted, and I was embarrassed. I knew my baby wanted to nurse, but I also knew I had a professional responsibility to deliver my paper. In retrospect I suppose that particular conference audience would not have had a hostile reaction had I nursed her then (that audience being quite unlike, say, that of the Australian Parliament when member Kirstie Marshall began to nurse her ten-day-old baby in session [see Bartlett 73-4]), but that solution didn't occur to me. The talk was neither my most confident moment as a scholar nor my happiest as a mother—definitely a “making do” moment.

After the session, though, a graduate student commented, “You make it look easy.” I think I smiled and shrugged. What I could have done, at that moment, but didn't do, is shout, “IT. IS. NOT. EASY!”

And yet there are days when it seems like it is. A few weeks after that conference, I was at my home computer holding the baby while my then-three-year-old napped upstairs, alternating between writing and e-mailing feedback on a grad student's job materials. I asked him to overlook typos in my feedback because I had the baby in one arm; he wrote back that I should be a superhero in my own comic book. I basked in that comment: a “making it” moment.

There are days when I feel like I am most certainly making it. When I have a writing epiphany, when a student paper simply sings, when an article is accepted, when my son shouts out “That's your college!” as we drive by—those are glorious moments. As I enter my fourth year as an assistant professor, it's probably too soon to tell if those moments will add up to success by the standards Bailiff, Davis, and Mountford outline. But in my fifth year as a mother, I've decided there are three ways of thinking about my life on the tenure track with small children. There's “making it” as a scholar, there's “making do” as a scholar-teacher because I'm a mom, and then there's “making it work.” And as long as I'm mothering and teaching and writing and publishing, I'm doing that, as the scholar-teacher-mother that I am.

Re-Structuring Possibilities

Mary P. Sheridan

Like the preceding authors as well as the academics Ballif, Davis, and Mountford interviewed, I too have been searching for the holy grail of balance, a balance that shifts as family and career responsibilities and opportunities shift. Throughout this re-balancing, I have faced a variety of options that reflect many of the choices faculty with children see for themselves. I had my first two (of three) children as a graduate student while at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. There, mentors like Gail Hawisher and Paul Prior modeled how senior colleagues can take a scholar/mother seriously as I worked to meet my scholarly and teaching obligations. My first tenure-track job showed the limits of that approach. Like many academic couples, my husband and I “split” our lives. I worked and lived with my children in one state while my husband worked and lived in a different state four days of each week. Many individuals at my R1 university were lovely, but the departmental culture was evident at a faculty welcome-back-to-school party; I was one of three out of perhaps fifty faculty who brought children. Ten years later, I am now a single parent going up for full professor at a Research Intensive university, a place far more hospitable to academics who publicly acknowledge they have families. Here, if I can meet the expectations of my job, which include attending some evening presentations and traveling for statewide conferences/professional meetings, etc., then it is not a problem if occasionally my children play in an empty classroom during my office hours or a faculty meeting. These diverging experiences reflect the successes and struggles that caregivers in academia regularly face. Yet, I believe that these seemingly individual experiences have a largely structural component. Therefore, in addition to examining how working parents make it in Composition Studies, as the previous essays explore, I would like to situate this elusive work-family balance in larger societal structures in which we in the academy are nestled.

First, it seems important to note that these struggles and successes are not unique to academia. In fact, nationally and internationally, there are high-profile conversations about work and family balance, and, as the cover story of the September 27, 2010 *Newsweek* makes clear, these conversations include, even privilege, a daddy perspective. As people and countries try to reconfigure what work and family mean in a globalized world where increasingly jobs are shifting, people are moving from familial support, and long-standing bread-winning gender roles are under intense pressure, it is clear that we need to re-think the work-family balance. Countries are experimenting with reshaping this balance, including offering more family-friendly policies so that men and women are offered the opportunity (and expected to take that opportunity) to have some financially supported

time with their families at intense moments (e.g., birth or adoption; family emergencies; elder care). What is specific to the U.S., however, is how little we do to structurally foster this balance. For example, while industrialized countries like Sweden, Germany, Britain, Japan, and Australia have developed governmentally-backed family-friendly policies such as those surrounding paternity leave, "the U.S. is now the only wealthy country that doesn't bankroll a bonding period for either parent" (Romano and Dokoupil 46) after a child is brought into the family.

Without changing structures, it is hard to alter practices so that people can legitimately take advantage of family-friendly policies. And without this, people find work structures hostile to families. This finding is certainly the case in U.S. universities. "The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education" (COACHE) at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education notes that although both male and female humanities tenure-track faculty rate their working conditions positively as compared to faculty across campus, one area where the humanities rate in the bottom quartile is in the faculty assessment that their "Institution makes raising children and tenure-track compatible" (11). Struggles around this issue seem more acutely felt by women; of the few categories within the humanities that significantly diverge based on gender, women rated their "ability to balance between professional and personal time" as significantly lower than men did.³ These findings echo similar recent reports that indicate that university structures and culture do not support women having children while in tenure-track jobs (see Kittelstrom; Mason).

There are always individual exceptions, yet looking at these trends in the aggregate highlights structural problems that for me, at least, require structural solutions. One solution is offered by Amy Kittelstrom, in the recent *Chronicle* piece, "The Academic-Motherhood Handicap": stop the silence around troubling university structures that cause individual women with children to make do, often to feel shunted to the second tier, in order to make it. Kittelstrom points out several layers of silence. One is the institutional silence that does not provide parents with (enough) information about the formal and informal policies surrounding parental leave. For example, a study conducted at Penn State University showed that in a seven year time frame, only seven of 500 eligible faculty took advantage of a formal parental leave policy, largely, the study authors argue, because the culture of this (and other) universities is that if you take that leave it will informally work against you at tenure time (Drago and Colbeck, qtd. in Ballif, Davis, and Mountford 177). A second silence surrounds employers asking good faith yet illegal questions (e.g., if potential employees have or plan to have children) in order to sell potential candidates on the great schools or the friendly neighborhoods. Now, job seekers may choose to relay personal information, as I felt forced to do when I went on campus interviews just eight

weeks after delivering my second child; like Kim, I was still breastfeeding and needed time and privacy to pump. I was lucky to work with enlightened interview committees at schools like those at the University of Louisville and Colorado State University who found ways to accommodate my needs and still evaluate me on my academic credentials. Not everyone is so fortunate. A third silence is what Kittelstrom calls the “vita gap” due to pregnancy and bearing/rearing a child. There is no simple solution for tenure evaluation during this crunch of personal and professional timelines, but to do nothing is to ensure women who have children late during graduate school and/or on the tenure track will be at a disadvantage.

A second way to redress the imbalances in family-work concerns is for our professional organizations to be more involved in creating new structures. For example, the AAUP’s “Statement of Principles on Family Responsibilities and Academic Work” offers this encouraging recommendation in its conclusion:

Because institutional policies may be easier to change than institutional cultures, colleges and universities should monitor the actual use of their policies over time to guarantee that every faculty member—regardless of gender—has a genuine opportunity to benefit from policies encouraging the integration of work and family responsibilities. The goal of every institution should be to create an academic community in which all members are treated equitably, families are supported, and family-care concerns are regarded as legitimate and important.

Within our own field, CCCC provides resources for people to understand “Family Leave/Work Life Balance” as well as puts into practice family-friendly structures, such as providing day care at CCCC. These policy statements and institutional practices support parents as we try to find ways to make it.

With the help of such family-friendly structures, many of us are finding ways to create a balance we can live with. We are not superwomen or men, but rather people tactically working in the cracks, with progressive colleagues and/or thoughtful mentors who help us to develop workarounds that blunt the effects of current structural constraints. The previous narratives explain in very personal terms how people on the ground are reworking these structural obstacles in order to make it as scholars and mothers in Rhetoric and Composition.

Conclusion

We hope the narratives we put forward here suggest there is much we can do to build on the conversations *Women’s Ways of Making It* introduces. By turning our attention to how various populations conceive of the work-

life balance, and how our colleagues—graduate students; part-time and full-time non-tenure-track instructors; male as well as female colleagues variously positioned both within and beyond the academy—conceive of, aspire to, and feel constrained by the notion of “making it” in the common publish-or-perish model privileged in *Women’s Ways*, we can better support each other in our endeavor to realize professional and personal fulfillment as mutually beneficial and sustainable realities. We have added a handful of new perspectives to the conversation, yet we are aware that there are many professional and life experiences not represented in our work. There are many ways to understand academic success. No one way can be the sole definition. We’ve shared our stories to spark additional conversations that can help us imagine, live, and make public this variety.

So what now? Where might we go from here? Our respective experiences have left each of us all the more aware of the importance of working together with our Rhetoric and Composition and department colleagues in order to establish more family-friendly academic structures that will benefit all of academia. First, we must address the seemingly individualistic idea of choice—the choice of caring for children, parents, family members—with the complex, often invisible structures that shape what choices are possible. Second, we need to expand the definition of scholarly success to include teaching, advising, and mentoring. Third, the profession must increase visibility of and a new acceptance for a greater range of balances, ones that promote various ways to be teachers, scholars, and family members.

To encourage this conversation and learn more about the rich diversity of women, their choices, and their work in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, the Women’s Lives in the Profession subcommittee of the CCCC’s Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession (CSWP) is currently inviting women within the field to narrate their own stories about working in this field (search “Start-up Kit,” on the CCCC website). Family-friendly changes within institutional structures by our professional organizations can also encourage a greater range of balances. Among the recent moves toward family-friendly structures are: 1) CCCC now makes childcare available so that academic care providers need not choose one role over the other; 2) several professional publications work to make visible problematic issues facing academic parents, as is evident in this special issue and *The Chronicle’s* recent series of articles about the “handicap” of being a mother in the academy today. We applaud these encouraging steps, yet we call for more widespread dialogue and action.

Furthermore, introducing new policies or revising practices will benefit no one if those eligible do not take advantage of family-friendly structures. These structures must be reinforced as accepted practice, or they will be lost. We know this may not always be easy; the majority of those taking advantage of some policies are pre- or non-tenured faculty—a population

who feels (and often is made to feel) powerless, vulnerable, and expendable. Therefore, we urge all faculty with families to take full advantage of current policies and to continue to speak up about unmet needs to colleagues and professional organizations (e.g., CCCC's Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession). And departments and established colleagues in our field must make family-friendliness a priority. Additionally, we need to respect alternative ways of being employed in the academy. Expanding our definitions of success is, in part, embracing all of our colleagues and their ideas regardless of status.

Clearly, experiencing professional success and fulfillment in a postsecondary academic context demands and should encourage a complex balance of the personal and the professional. This balance is more varied than many reports would imply, yet is more constricting than many of us would want. Broadening our understandings of making it will provide a long overdue revolution for the institutions and individuals within our departments, our schools, and more generally, academe.

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Notes

- 1 Although the descriptor "Research I" (R1) is no longer officially applicable, we use the term because it remains in regular use to describe universities with very high research-output expectations. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has revised its 1970 designations twice (in 2006 and again in 2010), shifting to a much more complex set of descriptors not yet in colloquial use. Carnegie's "new categories are not comparable to those previously used" ("Classification Description").
- 2 See "Pumping on the Market" (Owens), which offers advice to search committees and nursing mothers on the academic job market. An earlier version of this paragraph appears in that article.
- 3 The COACHE job satisfaction Survey, according to the Harvard study, included 1,114 respondents, with just under 54% female and just over 46 % male (37). The same survey focused on tenure-track faculty on the clock after one year in doctoral institutions.

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