

Reflections on the Current Status of Women in American Higher Education

By Lillian Robbins & Edwin Robbins

Lillian Robbins, Professor of Psychology, Rutgers University

Edwin Robbins, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, New York University Medical Center and Albert Einstein College of Medicine

Abstract

Since World War II, American women have gained much greater access to higher education, with women now 56% of undergraduates, and approximately half of medical and law school students, as well as attaining 49% of PhD's. Despite their greater representation, women pursuing professional careers still experience considerable stress. At the institutional level, career opportunities remain unequal, with men still earning better pay at all ranks and having greater access to resources, as well as continuing to predominate as senior faculty. Fewer women gain tenured positions and promotions than in the 1970's, as the enforcement of Affirmative Action policies has slackened, and increasing numbers of courses are taught by contingent faculty. At the personal level, many women feel ambivalent about working when they have young children, and there are many potential conflicts if dual careers are involved, especially if there are heavy training-incurred debts, and if jobs entail difficult commutes or no work for one partner. We will review data on faculty rank and salary over the years, and discuss the implications of shifts in the academic environment as they interact with changing aspects of personal relationships and social expectations.

In recent decades, the number of women enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs in the United States has dramatically increased. Women obtained 19% of undergraduate degrees at the beginning of the 20th Century. By 1984, 49% of college degrees were earned by women, some of them "returning" students, older than the traditional 18-22 year old cohort. By 2001, more than 50% of undergraduates were women, and more recent figures go as high as 56% (Yoder, 2003).

In 1930, 2% of American lawyers and judges were women. Until 1950, Harvard Law School did not accept women as students, and there were no women on the tenured faculty until more than twenty years later (Kay, 2004). By 1989, the number of female law students had risen to 22%, and law school student bodies now typically include as many women as men. At the University of California-Berkeley's Boalt Hall School of Law, 64% of the students in 2000 were women (West et al, 2005). In 1972, when Ruth Bader Ginsburg became a Professor at Columbia Law School, she was

one of only twenty women with that status in the entire country (Kay, 2004). While the number of tenured faculty women had no way to go but up, progress has been slow. Similarly, medical schools now enroll approximately 50% women, in contrast to fewer than 10% fifty years ago. However, a study of faculty at medical schools around the country showed that women are still under-represented in tenured ranks and in senior administration, and that their promotion rates and salaries lag far behind their male peers (Ash et al, 2004).

Students have changed, not only in terms of gender representation, but also in terms of such factors as race, ethnicity and social class. The March/April 2005 issue of *Academe*, the journal of national AAUP, states that current students are more likely than their parents to need to work at least part-time to pay for tuition and other costs, and cites the results of an annual survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA to the effect that 53% of first year women and 40% of entering men need to get jobs to help pay for their education (p. 4). The effect of work status on retention and graduation rates, as well as on the choice of majors and the amount of out of class reading and thinking is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is clear that prior distinctions between full-time, straight out of high school day students and older, working evening students, has become blurred, just as the number of people graduating within four years of admission to college has gotten smaller. While the student body has become increasingly diverse, the faculty has remained relatively homogeneous (Balliet et al, 2005; West et al, 2005).¹

¹ While minorities are also under-represented among faculty, the current paper will concentrate on women because the pool of qualified people is larger in most disciplines, and makes selectivity and discrimination more readily apparent.

With regard to the faculty: Men still predominate as senior faculty. Women are more likely to cluster at the lowest ranks, and are promoted more slowly (Academe, 2005, Rosser, 2004, Valian, 1999)². The discrepancy is most marked at Universities that grant doctorates, where women are still fewer than 20% of the faculty, and least at two year community colleges, where the faculty is now evenly split by gender (Academe, 2005). The 1999 MIT study of tenured women faculty (cited in Rosser, 2004) showed that the science faculty included 15 tenured women and 197 tenured men, and that the 7% representation of females had remained stagnant for twenty years. Unpublished data from the University of California indicate that 87% of recent new hires have been white males, when more than 45% of the PhD's granted in the last decade have been earned by women (West et al, 2005). In 2001, the University of California's PhD-granting sites had 23.5% women faculty in tenured or tenure-track ranks, Stanford 17% and Harvard 12.9% (West et al, 2005). Schumer (2005) cites data showing that, although women have gotten one third of American PhD's in Math for the past two decades, women are only 4.6% of Math professors at prestigious universities. Glayzer-Ramo (1999, cited in Neimeier and Gonzalez, 2004) estimated that, at the present rate of progress, it will take women until 2149 to achieve parity with men as full Professors.

Even though it is often believed that taking care of a family is a deterrent to productivity, and hence professional success, evidence shows that mothers who are determined to have professional careers publish as much as virtually all men in their fields (Valian, 1999). Based on their study of medical school faculty around the country, Ash et al(2004) concluded that, while family responsibilities were a factor in women's slower promotion rate, "at all levels of productivity, women are less likely to be full professors than their male peers" (p. 210). Valian (1999) cites

²While criteria for tenure and promotion appear to be objective, they are sufficiently ambiguous that the tendency to devalue the work of women can be a serious hazard (Lott, 1985; Valian, 1999). This is compounded by the difficulties of comparing the number of pages and publications for different disciplines, and by the inclusion of such nebulous categories as "collegiality."

parallel findings for studies of business, law, and humanities and social science faculty.

Among the many reasons for the limited hiring of women in tenure track positions, although the pool in many disciplines is now very large – in Psychology, 73% of PhD's are now awarded to women-- are several factors that relate to changed images of Universities, as primarily research, rather than teaching institutions. People now hired as Assistant Professors often need to have teaching experience, publications and grants, and criteria for tenure and promotion also exceed those of twenty years ago. Further, in an effort to accelerate the process of improving their image as research powerhouses, Universities hire a substantial number of established researchers, who are predominantly white males (Balliet et al., 2005; Valian, 1999). These senior appointments, even more than those at the Assistant Professor level, bypass Affirmative Action guidelines, even though most position listings still claim that universities are "Equal Opportunity Employers" (Balliet et al, 2005; West et al, 2005).

Men are still better paid at all ranks, and in every type of institution. Of 159 possible comparisons of male and female salaries, in public, private and church-related institutions, men earned more than women in 96% (Academe, 2005, Table 5). The only exceptions were for women serving as Associate Professors in two year colleges, and for some lecturers and instructors, where the full-time salaries were in the \$40 to \$45,000 range.

The earning differentials increase as people are promoted from Assistant to full Professor, and are magnified, since merit awards and benefits such as pensions and insurance are tied to salaries. Average annual differences between men and women of approximately \$1500 at the Assistant Professor level grow to between \$9,500 and \$11,000 for Professors. Since men continue to be promoted at a faster rate than women (Rosser, 2004; Valian, 1999), the lifetime discrepancies

between male and female salaries can mount to hundreds of thousands.

In addition, men are likely to have better access to other resources, such as start-up packages and lab space (Rosser, 2004), and to be required to teach fewer courses and serve on fewer committees than women (Valian, 1999). Since teaching and service tend to count less than grants and publications at research universities, women are seriously disadvantaged.

The salary disparities may be due in part to choice of disciplines, since women tend to be clustered in lower paid fields such as English, languages and nursing, while men predominate in more lucrative areas such as computer science, engineering and physics (Neimeier & Gonzalez, 2004.) The same principle applies to the subfields that attract women. For instance, in medicine, family practice, pediatrics and psychiatry are paid substantially less than mostly male specialties such as neurosurgery and orthopedics (Ash et al, 2004).

Women are over-represented in part-time and non-tenure track full-time positions. While 47% of full-time women are tenured, 70% of men are (Academe, p. 28). Forty-five percent of faculty jobs are now part-time— a group that includes graduate students, professionals eager to share their experiences with students in exchange for the status of a college connection, and a group that teaches on a part-time basis, often at multiple institutions, over a career lifetime. Over one half of new full-time appointments at American universities are now non-tenure track, and represent 19% of faculty (Academe, 2005). This means that nearly two thirds of college faculty are now neither tenured nor tenure track. Even though some people take these jobs in the hope that a foot in the door will help them get a tenure track appointment when one becomes available, this type of transition is extremely rare (Valian, 1999).

The contingent faculty positions typically are associated with low salaries, limited health care and pension benefits, and contracts renewable at the Administration's discretion. In addition to being

cheaper and providing flexibility³ the contingent faculty is less likely to seek a role in governance or to challenge administration rulings, as well as being less available to students seeking advice and letters of recommendation.

Senior administrators continue to be predominantly males, and often are professionals with limited academic experience (Academe, 2005). The salaries of college Presidents, not including housing, transportation, and entertainment allowances, now range from 2 to 5 times the salary of average Professors at Public Universities, and 2 to 7 times at the better-paid private institutions (Academe, 2005). Women in administration still tend to cluster as Assistant or Associate Deans, or in the Dean of Students' office, where they earn relatively low salaries and do not typically become involved in financial and policy decisions (Rosser, 2004).

Men continue to predominate as department Chairs. A survey of 2817 departments at Research Institutions (Neimeier & Gonzalez, 2004) found that women chaired 17% of departments over all, but only 2% of engineering and math/statistics departments. Women are more likely to chair departments in the Humanities and Social Sciences, but still far less than men. This restricts their chances for advancement, since Chairs are more likely than other faculty to be considered for senior administrative positions.

Implications:

A. Institutional:

1. As the current tenured faculty retires or dies, relatively few will be replaced. Faculty is likely to become a multi-tier group, with numerous poorly paid people who predominantly teach undergraduates— whether in large introductory courses or at community colleges; and a far

³ In the 1960's and 70's, underemployed tenured physicists were likely to become administrators or teach computer science, while classics and education professors were let go when enrollments in their courses dropped.

smaller group of well-paid people, who will primarily work with graduate students and do grant-funded research. A realistic prediction, based on trends already apparent, is that women will predominate as the college teachers of the future, while men will concentrate on research and graduate training. This would parallel the changes that took place in nursing and elementary education, which are now largely seen as women's fields.

2. The increased reliance on contingent faculty will have some benefits for administration, in providing cheaper workers who do not have a long-term commitment. But one wonders who will provide the additional services that tenured faculty have engaged in—overseeing the curriculum, serving on committees, chairing departments, advising students, writing letters of recommendation, participating in institutional governance. One could also predict that, without the security of tenure, people will be less likely to teach about controversial issues or risk contradicting higher-ups. In this sense, what we have known as academic freedom will essentially cease to exist.

3. Although there now seems to be an endless supply of people willing to work in higher education, there may be long-term effects on graduate programs, if relatively few decent careers are possible. One can predict that the number of people willing to spend the time and money for dead end doctorates will shrink. This could be accelerated for the sciences, if the grants on which research universities depend dry up.

4. As higher education becomes increasingly concerned with bottom line issues and corporate models, one can predict larger classes, more standardized exams, and on-line options where students and teachers never meet. In the age of Phoenix and other proprietary schools, imagining colleges where instructors will read scripts and computers grade exams, obviating the need for individual thinking and innovating is not far away. Students already are wondering why they should attend classes when faculty put the course power point slides on line, and much

faculty/student communication now takes place via e mail.

At what point will faculty, as we have known it, cease to exist and be outsourced? According to the *New York Times* (2005), the State University of New York is in the process of developing the first online bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering, funded in part by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The same brief article points out that over 100,000 students are already taking SUNY courses online, in connection with 94 degree and certificate programs, some of them military personnel in Iraq. This trend is not new. In World War II, college correspondence courses were available, and teachers were both supportive and excellent. However, technological advances are making unprecedented changes more possible.

5. Although efforts have been made to increase institutional supports for women in the form of such programs as parental leaves, on-site day care, personnel searches that seek out qualified women, and providing jobs for spouses who are also academics (Rosser, 2004; Valian, 1999), it is likely that such efforts may be undermined by the overall economic and social trends.

While we had naively thought that universities could be a model for demanding jobs with flexibility, ideal for women with children, and for people who wanted to maintain some autonomy and creativity in their work, the world is increasingly turning to less than full-time jobs, with limited or few benefits and no security. While women will be employed in larger numbers, the gains will be far less than they hoped for.

B. Personal:

Despite their greater representation, women pursuing professional careers still experience considerable stress:

1. A number of studies have shown that women often report feeling marginalized,

having their opinions and research less valued than male colleagues, and being treated as “intellectually inferior” (Rosser, 2004; Valian, 1999).

2. Women who have children often experience conflicts about balancing family and work. How does one spend time and energy with children, when there are great job demands? Who will take time off if there is sickness or a family emergency? Who will do the chores and be the “wife” on a day to day basis? One common thread unifying women who work and have primary responsibility for families— including both children and elderly parents and in-laws— is that their personal interests go by the wayside, and they are almost always tired (Evetts, 1994). While many men could say the same, attempts to solve potential conflicts between family and work demands are still largely seen as individual women’s issues, rather than social responsibilities (Rosser, 2004). One Nobel prize winner, the biologist Christiane Nusslein-Volhard has addressed this issue by providing grants for women scientists to help pay for someone else to cook and do the laundry (Bhattacharjee, 2005), but this is unlikely to be sufficient.

3. Women professionals tend to marry or partner others at their level, though professional men still overwhelmingly marry women who are willing to take care of household and children, as well as edit publications and serve as sounding boards for their ideas (Yoder, 2003). This means that women often need to face conflicts about dual careers, especially if the couple has heavy training-induced debt. What if one person has a good offer and the other can only find work thousands of miles away? Whose career aspirations take precedence, particularly if one partner is capable of earning more than the other? In some dual career families, there is a huge cost— both financial and personal— in terms of needing to commute, especially if school age children are involved; in others, the less ambitious partner may be willing to stay at home, but there may be resentments. If the couple has sufficient resources, paid help may reduce tensions, but it may not

always be easy to find reliable surrogates, nor to pay sufficient attention to family members. Idealists may also object to finding personal satisfaction in their work on the basis of the efforts of typically poorly paid and predominantly female household help.

4. Many women may experience conflicts about *not* having a family, in a culture where females in particular are brought up to think of themselves as wives and mothers, whatever else they do. Data about professional women show that the majority are single or divorced, and that many partnered women are childless. When women become single mothers by choice, they face tremendous problems. Who is available to help take care of their child and support their career ?

5. Men are increasingly becoming involved in their families, especially child care, and finding that they like a less workaholic life style, often made possible if there are two wage earners in the family. One of the challenges facing our society is how to make “having a life” more appealing for men, and taking time off to help take care of children less stigmatizing than is presently the case for many. When Thomas L. Friedman (2005) wrote that young people in China and India are now ready to work 35 hours a day, rather than 35 hours a week, he suggested that taking the time to smell too many roses may prove hazardous both to the individual and communal economy. At the same time, excessive work may prove to be personally destructive, rather than a blessing.

In this context, it should be noted that, when President Summers of Harvard made his now-notorious comments about innate factors being primarily responsible for the scarcity of women in the higher levels of academic science (Rimer & Healy, 2005), he also added that few women were willing to put in the 80 hour work that such careers require. He ignored the fact that the majority of striving women have committed themselves to intensive work over the years, regardless of marital and family status, and the barriers placed in their way that made their progress more difficult than many of their male peers.

We have raised these issues in the hopes of considering what might be done to help improve both the status of women in higher education and the quality of work and family life in our society. The issues are complex, and it is clear that helping to ameliorate one aspect may cause new and unanticipated difficulties. At the same time, ignoring the problems that we have outlined means that the contributions of many women will continue to be stifled and/or ignored.

References:

- American Association of University Professors (AAUP) (2005). Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession, 2004-2005. *Academe*, 91, 2, March-April.
- Ash, A.S., Carr, P.L., Goldstein, R. & Friedman, R.H. (2004). Compensation and Advancement of Women in Academic Medicines: Is there equity? *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 141, 205-212.
- Balliet, B., Hawkesworth, M., Hetfield, L., Morgan, J. & Robbins, L. (2005). Feminist Interventions: Creating New Institutional Spaces for Women at Rutgers. Unpublished paper presented at Ford Foundation conference on "Re-Affirming Action: Designs for Diversity in Higher Education. New Brunswick, NJ, March.
- Battacharjee, Y. (2005). Pioneers. *Science*, 308, 949.
- Evetts, J. (1994). Career and Motherhood in Engineering: Cultural dilemmas and individualistic solutions. *J. Gender Studies*, 3, 177-185.
- Friedman, T.L. (2005). 35 Hour week vs. 35 Hour days. *New York Times Op.Ed.*
- Kay, H. H. (2004). Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Professor of Law. *Columbia Law Review*, 104, 2-20.
- Lott, B. (1985). The Devaluation of Women's Competence. *J. Soc. Issues*, 41, 4, 43-60.
- Niemeier, D.A. & Gonzalez, C. (2004). Breaking into the Guildmasters' Club: What we Know about Women Science and Engineering Department Chairs at AAU Universities. *NWSA Journal*, 16, 157-171.
- Rimer, S. & Healy, P.D. (2005). Furor Lingers as Harvard Chief Gives Details of Talk on Women. *New York Times*, February 18, A1 & 20.
- Robbins, L. & Kahn, E.D. (1985). Sex Discrimination and Sex Equity for Faculty Women in the 1980's. *J. Soc. Issues*, 41, 4, 1-15.
- Rosser, S.V. (2004). *The Science Glass Ceiling: Academic Women Scientists and the Struggle to Succeed*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Schumer, F. (2005). In Princeton, Taking on Harvard's Fuss about Women. *New York Times, NJ edition*, June 19.
- SUNY to offer major online degree. (2005). *New York Times*, July 5, B2.
- Valian, V. (1999). *Why so Slow? The Advancement of Women*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- West, M.S., Laky, G., Lokke, K., Paw U, K.T. & Ham, S. (2005). The University of California: Gender Discrimination in Faculty Hiring. Unpublished paper presented at Ford Foundation Conference on "Re-Affirming Action: Designs for Diversity in Higher Education. New Brunswick, NJ, March.
- Yoder, J.D. (2003). *Women and Gender: Transforming Psychology*. (2nd. Ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2006.