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Parents, Professionals, and Preschoolers: The Experience of Working Parents at a Christian, Liberal Arts Institution

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PARENTS, PROFESSIONS, AND PRESCHOOLERS: THE EXPERIENCE OF
WORKING PARENTS AT A CHRISTIAN, LIBERAL ARTS INSTITUTION

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Graduate Studies

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, IN

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

_____

By

Sara E. James

May 2010

Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL
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MASTERS THESIS
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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Sara E. James

entitled

Parents, Professions, and Preschoolers: The Experience of Working Parents at a
Christian, Liberal Arts Institution

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the
Master of Arts degree

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ABSTRACT

Working parents with young children experience unique challenges when working at an institution of higher education. Each parent-professional's experience is different, but researchers have revealed certain commonalities which will be examined in this study. The nine participants, all of whom work at a Christian liberal arts institution in the Midwest, in this study represent parents of pre-kindergarten age children. These individuals work in various ways on campus: administration, teaching faculty, student development faculty, and salaried staff. Ultimately, in this phenomenological study I seek to help university administrators, as well as parent-professionals, understand the tension between the demands of professional and domestic responsibilities.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry is to understand the experiences of working parents of young children at a small, mid-western, Christ-centered university. Additionally, in this study I seek to describe the unique challenges and support needs felt by these employees. The majority of previous studies on this topic have focused almost exclusively on teaching faculty members. I aim to investigate the experiences of several different types of employees. The institution seeks to hire employees who have a long-term commitment to working there, thus it is critical for the institution to be proactive and creative in their recruitment and retention of new employees, many of whom will be likely starting families.

During the past three decades, women have become an influential entity in American higher education. Today over half of all college students are female. Moreover, while there are still more men earning doctorates than women, there has been a proliferation in the number of women pursuing their doctorates. The National Center for Education Statistics (2009) notes in the 2006-2007 academic year 50.1% of PhDs were awarded to women. These degrees often enable women to be more involved in higher education.

While women are becoming more educated, overall the structure for tenure and work schedule in higher education has not changed. The academy was created by men and around male life cycles. The AAUP (2001) states:

> A probationary period of seven or fewer years allows faculty members to establish their record for tenure. Historically, this probationary period was based on the assumption that the scholar was male and that his work would not be interrupted by domestic responsibilities, such as raising children. When the tenure system was created, the male model was presumed to be universal. It was assumed that untenured faculty—whether men or women—were not the sole, primary, or even coequal caretakers of newborn or newly adopted children. (p. 1)

Being granted tenure is highly desirable for teaching faculty. Unfortunately, for women, the tenure clock and biological clock are synchronized, which often creates difficulties. The timeline is simple: a woman is approximately 22-years-old when she graduates, 27-years-old when she receives her PhD, 30-years-old by the time she completes her post-doctoral work, and 36-years-old by the time she would be reviewed for tenure. Be the time a woman is 35 years of age, she is considered "high risk" for a pregnancy (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2007). This obviously creates a predicament for women, especially if an individual does not follow the typical academic timeline or has fertility or pregnancy complications. These factors play into the challenges faced by women employed in higher education.

Since the founding of Harvard in 1636, Christianity has played a significant role in American higher education. While many private institutions have loose ties to their original Christian denominations, presently, 111 schools comprise the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). The CCCU's mission "is to advance the cause of Christ-centered higher

education and to help our institutions transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical truth" (CCCU, 2009). The institutions which comprise the CCCU base their standards and regulations on biblical principles.

It is possible each CCCU institution could have a unique interpretation of what God's Word says about gender roles due to denominational affiliation. Christians have traditionally supported the philosophy a woman should work inside the home and care for her children. However, present economic realities simply require more women to work (Greenhouse, 2009). Providing for the family financially is not the only reason why women work. They also join the workforce in order to serve society, engage in meaningful work, remain mentally active, and utilize their academic degrees (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). Conflicting messages from the church, personal and professional role models, and the workplace have made it even more difficult for parents to discern how to balance family and work responsibilities.

Mentors and role models have a major impact on college students and it would be beneficial for them to see and understand the experiences of working parents. Because more and more mothers are entering the work force, it is important for undergraduates to learn from them, both inside and outside of the classroom. It is critical for these parent-employees to feel supported in order for them to have persistence in their professional roles. This persistence will provide consistent role models for students. Thus, my aim in this study is to understand not only the unique challenges of working parents, but also how to support them throughout their careers.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women in the work place

Women were not always prominent in the American work force. During World War II, the United States experienced a major increase in female workers. The war created a need for women to enter the work force. The United States government created a propaganda campaign using Rosie the Riveter to entice women into working. The campaign used financial pressures as the primary motivator to encourage women to join the workforce. More than 60 years later, a 2007 study confirmed 71% of all mothers in the United States were employed (Employment Characteristics, 2008). Many modern women work because they find enrichment, achievement, challenges, and stimulation (Grady & McCarthy, 2008).

Due to the significant presence of women in the workforce, there is much literature devoted to the family-work conflict. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) define the family-work conflict as:

> a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family
> domains are mutually incompatible in some respect. That is, participation in the work
> (family) role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family (work) role.
> (p.77)

It is interesting to note most of the literature about work-family conflict focuses on women, not men. The phrase "family-work conflict" has a negative connotation and insinuates women alone struggle to find balance between career and domestic responsibilities.

Women in Higher Education

Traditionally, it is thought female professionals fare worse than their male counterparts in higher education. This is likely because when American higher education began, it was based on male life cycles. Change occurred in 1837 when four women enrolled at Oberlin College in Ohio (Rudolph, 1990). This began the coeducational process at the post-secondary level in the United States. Today over half of all college students are female. Along with an increase in the enrollment of female students over the past three decades the number of female faculty members has also grown. During the 2005-2006 academic year, women comprised approximately 45% of all professors in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

Despite their growing presence in the field, female faculty members are still trying to navigate their way in the academy. One element key to these women's' professional longevity and success with family-work conflict is a supportive work environment. Seyler and Monroe (1995) define a supportive work environment as one that affords job sharing, provides pretax reimbursement for childcare, and permits flexible work schedules. Institutions have just recently started changing their structure and implementing policies for all female employees to accommodate the unique responsibilities mothers have. Policy changes include paid maternity leave, on-site childcare, health coverage, part-time and job-sharing arrangements, and expanded urgent care time-off. Princeton recently expanded its family-friendly practices (Millman, 2007). The institution will grant both biological and adoptive mothers who are graduate students three months paid leave. Furthermore, the school is granting back-up childcare, care-related transportation funds, and need-based grants for childcare costs to mothers who are pursuing their doctorate.

Changes in Modern Fatherhood

Traditionally, the father's primary role in the family was as the provider, working outside of the home to earn an income as a means of supporting his family. While the majority of fathers still work outside of the home, there have been some significant shifts in fathering during the past four decades. For instance, according to two studies in the last 40 years (Robinson & Godbey 1999; Fisher, Egerton, Gershuny, & Robinson, 2006), men have doubled their involvement in total amount of housework from 15 to 30 percent. Likewise, fathers are spending more time with their children. Between 1965 and 2004, fathers tripled the amount of time they spend with their co-resident children (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2005; Fisher et al., 2006). Moreover, the number of stay-at-home fathers has almost tripled in the past decade to 2.7 percent of parents who choose to stay-at-home full-time (Shaver, 2007). While many men are increasing their involvement in domestic and childcare responsibilities, women still undertake the majority of these tasks.

Changes in the Modern Workplace

The workday is no longer confined to a 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. schedule or a single workplace. Today, some employers arrange flex place and flex time opportunities for their employees. Flexplace, or telecommuting, is "an option that allows an employee to work at home or another off-site location, for a specified number of hours per week, and for a pre-set, limited duration" (Cornell University, 2009, p. 1). Similarly, flextime is "a work schedule that permits flexible starting and quitting times" (Christensen & Staines, 1990, p. 1).

In comparison with other countries, the United States' provision of maternity leave is dismal. Currently, the United States' government requires public and private elementary and

secondary schools, all public agencies, and companies with 50 or more employees to give their employees 12 weeks of unpaid leave and a guarantee of resuming their position upon their return. Employees may take advantage of this time for the birth and care of a newborn, the placement of an adopted or foster care child, to take medical leave if the employee has a serious health condition, or to care for an immediate relative (spouse, child, or parent) with a serious health condition. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, "Employees are eligible for leave if they have worked for their employer at least 12 months, at least 1,250 hours over the past 12 months, and work at a location where the company employs 50 or more employees within 75 miles" (United States Department of Labor, 2009).

While this law is essential to healthy family dynamics, it looks weak when compared with other countries around the world. Australia and the United States are the only developed nations in the entire world that do not offer paid maternity leave. According to H. Brown (2009):

France, Singapore and Austria all offer four months' paid maternity leave benefits, and Germany offers 14 weeks. In the U.K., a woman receives 90% of her salary for up to a year off with her baby. Swedish mothers hit the jackpot with 480 days off at 80% of their salary, followed by their counterparts in Serbia and Denmark with a full year off at full pay. Even in Gambia, Somalia and Vietnam new mothers receive at least three months' paid maternity leave. (p. 1)

Numerous adjustments take place when parents introduce a new child into their family. This assurance of being able to return to a job after maternity or paternity leave is one of the primary policies allowing employed parents to take the time they need to adjust to their new child while still financially supporting their growing family.

Many studies show if an employer has a generous maternity leave, then the new child, the employee-parent, and the employer all benefit. Paid maternity leave makes it easier for a new mother to breastfeed, which provides the infant with vital antibodies that help protect the baby from bacterial and viral infections. Studies indicate women who have breastfed are less likely to have certain types of ovarian and breast cancers (Galson, 2008). Also, more time with the mother will allow for better emotional bonding. The U.S. Surgeon General (2008) states:

> Until recently, when breastfeeding mothers returned to work, they faced the challenge of maintaining an adequate milk supply. But many employers have discovered that accommodating employees who breastfeed is good business. The Office on Women's Health in the US Department of Health and Human Services notes that the health benefits to mother and baby conveyed by breastfeeding translate into reduced costs to employers due to lower health care costs, decreased absenteeism, enhanced productivity, improved employee satisfaction, and a better corporate image. (p. 1)

Two important ways to make breastfeeding possible for women is to provide childcare on-location or near the workplace and/or provides a location to nurse or pump breast milk. Easy accessibility to one's child allows a parent to feed her child in person. If this is not a possibility, then is it essential for employers to provide nursing mothers with a clean and private place to pump.

One additional academic-specific, parent-friendly policy is the establishment of tenure stop. Tenure stop is the practice of allowing a non-tenured faculty member who has a child to step out of the tenure process for a set amount of time to allow the new parent to adjust to his/her new role and not be penalized professionally. This important procedure would help many new

parents fulfill their current domestic and professional responsibilities and still have a successful academic career.

Experiences of women at CCCU schools

Theological Implications and Christian Higher Education

Traditional gender roles are typically the ones supported within evangelical Christian culture, including the subculture that exists at CCCU institutions (Cbb, 2007). Influential evangelical leaders such as James Dobson, Joshua Harris, John Piper, and Mark Driscoll support traditional gender roles, also known as complementarianism. This conservative stance maintains the husband's role is to provide for his family and a wife's is to take care of domestic responsibilities (Bartkowski, 1999).

More specifically, CCCU alumni report 82% it was extremely important to them to raise a family, in comparison with 63% at flagship public institutions (Hardwick Day, n.d.). Since the majority of CCCU alumni have a strong desire to raise a family, it is critical CCCU institutions have more models for current students who also hope to raise families. Due to current economic realities, many women will pursue careers and raise a family; in fact, the majority of mothers work outside of the home (Employment Characteristics, 2008). As the workforce is increasingly comprised of women, it will become more and more important for women to have strong role models who are professionals and mothers. Working mothers at colleges and universities are in an advantageous position to be this positive and practical influence on both male and female students (Hall, Anderson, & Willingham, 2004).

Mothers Working at CCCU Institutions

There has been very little research conducted on the experiences of female faculty and staff members at CCCU institutions. One reason could be the low number of women working at CCCU institutions in comparison with their male counterparts. For instance, in 1995, females comprised only 30% of total faculty members in the CCCU (Higher Education, 1997). Likewise, a study found within CCCU institutions only 14% of the chief academic officers were women. That number increased to 26% at non-CCCU schools (Cejda, Bush Jr., Rewey, 2002). In contrast, a large percentage of those employed in student development at these institutions are women, with female employees, making up 50% of the members of the Association of Christians in Student Development (ACSD) (M.A. Searle, personal communication, April 5, 2009). While women participate in a myriad of positions within CCCU institutions, the fact there are so many women employed within residence life can be linked to the fact many of those positions specifically require women.

In a landmark study investigating the experiences of working mothers at CCCU schools, Hall, Anderson, and Willingham (2004) divided their findings into two categories: first-order needs and second-order needs. The authors defined first-order needs as having "to do with managing emotional space and feeling emotional support" (p. 47). Second-order needs are more practical in nature. Hall et al. state second-order needs "represent ways of negotiating environmental demands in an attempt to satisfy the subjective needs, as well as needs of family members and the academic institutions" (2004). The study revealed the participants' first-order needs as the need for identity integration, the freedom to establish priorities, and the need for understanding. Likewise, the second-order needs were freedom in combining career and family, freedom in setting boundaries, flexibility in scheduling, flexibility in career, and need for supportive policies and practical support (Hall et al., 2004).

While there are more men with young children than women with young children working at the studied institution, the number of women with pre-kindergarten aged children who are working is considerably lower than the number of men with young children. There are various reasons for this trend. As stated previously, the first reason is traditional gender roles are strongly supported in the evangelical Christian culture and therefore many women choose not to pursue a career when there are young children in the family. Secondly, there is the difficulty of managing both work and family responsibilities. Thirdly, it is reported convictions held by employees related to denominational views on motherhood and gender roles have created a work climate where many mothers do not feel supported (Gartlett, 1997).

Research Questions

1. What is the experience of working parents at the studied institution?

2. What are the specific challenges for these employees?

3. What are the specific support structures in place and needed for these employees?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative investigation's methodology is rooted in phenomenological research. The purpose of a qualitative study is to gather meaning through words or pictures instead of numbers (Bogdan & Bilken, 1982). Creswell (2003) states phenomenological research allows the investigator to identify the "essence of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in a study" (p. 15). It is important to not only understand what the participant is sharing, but to also understand the context from which they are speaking. Moustakas (1994) notes, "This interrelationship – the direct conscious description of experience and the underlying dynamics or structures account for the experience – provides a central meaning and unity that enables one to understand the substance and essence of the experience" (p.9). One of the main benefits of only interviewing participants who work at one institution is that each employee works in the same campus culture, aims to embody and support the same institutional mission, and has access to utilize the same institutional policies.

There has been little research conducted on this minority group at the studied institution. This method was chosen because of the emphasis on the distinct experiences these employees have. Furthermore, the researcher's personal experience heavily influenced her interest in the research topic. As previously stated, my primary goal in this study is to examine the experience of working parents, the unique challenges these employees face, and the best ways to support them.

Participants

The studied institution is a Midwestern, Christian, liberal arts institution with approximately 1,880 undergraduate students from 44 states and 31 foreign countries. 55 percent of the student body is comprised of women (Taylor University, 2009). The Human Resources department has no record of how many women have utilized the university's maternity leave policy. One department member estimates eight to ten women have utilized the policy during her 13 years working at the studied institution (Anonymous, personal communication, 2009). This illustrates how few working mothers of young children there are at this institution.

Due to a very small pool of potential participants, a convenience sampling was utilized in this study. The researcher sought permission to interview the participants. All of the participants currently work full-time and have at least one child at home who is pre-kindergarten school age. The participants represent various types of employees at the studied institution – administration, teaching faculty, student development faculty, and salaried staff. Four women and five men were interviewed. All of the participants were married and all of the female participants' spouses were currently working outside the home as well. Two of the male participants' wives worked part-time outside of the home. In order to protect their identity, the investigator had them choose a pseudonym: Lori, Matilda, Dierdra, Claudia, Dwight, Carl, James, Tommy, and Henry.

Procedure and Interview Protocol

All of the interviews took place in a professional setting. The investigator explained the purpose of the study and obtained written consent. Each interview was based on structured questions, but the length of the interviews varied to allow each interviewee to share at his or her own pace and focus on the areas that were most important to him/her. The interview lengths ranged from 45 minutes to one and a half hours.

Initially, the researcher contacted potential participants via email. If he or she was willing to be interviewed, the interview questions were sent to the participants to preview before the interview. At the beginning of each interview, the investigator read the consent form aloud and had the participant sign and date the consent form. Each interview was tape recorded and then transcribed. After reviewing the transcriptions, the data was coded for themes. The researcher also sent the transcription to the participant for checking to ensure the information recorded was accurate and to give the participant the opportunity to remove or add any comments. When this study was completed, the recordings were destroyed.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

There were five questions that guided each interview. The following section reveals how the participants responded to these questions.

What are the challenges you have faced as a working parent?

All of the participants voiced feeling challenged in their attempts to balance work and family responsibilities. Five of the nine participants shared how difficult they found it to navigate his or her current situation due to lack of role models in other working parents who have had similar experiences.

What supports helped you work through those challenges?

Consistently, the participants stated their spouses were their primary source of support. Seven of the nine participants revealed their families, specifically parents, mothers-in-law, and fathers-in-law, have been particularly helpful as these family members have provided child care, relieving a major concern for these employees.

As the literature stated, flexibility is a key aspect of the modern workplace. Hall, Anderson, and Willingham (2004) found the following components of perceived needs for working parents at CCCU institutions:

- the need for identity integration
- the freedom to establish priorities
- the need for understanding
- freedom in combining career and family

- freedom in setting boundaries

- flexibility in scheduling

- flexibility in career

- need for supportive policies and practical support.

Seven of the nine participants revealed the flexibility of their position and/or his or her supervisor enabled or disabled them to be both a parent and an employee. Henry stated:

> Another support has been a supervisor who has been pretty understanding of [the difficulty of balancing work and family responsibilities]. And there have been sometimes I have asked for more structure or more expectation so I know that I am not taking advantage of [his generosity] but he is pretty supportive…. He wants to know but doesn't want to know. He wants to know where I am going to be so he can be informed but he doesn't want me to feel I always have to ask permission. He trusts me to make wise choices and that I am going to get my work done and that if I need to be somewhere I will feel that latitude. And so [near the time of my child's birth] or that kind of thing, he [was] very supportive of that… and understood… that I might need to adjust my workday a little bit…. I didn't even have a hesitation in approaching him because I knew he was supportive…

Moreover, five participants said their supervisor was supportive. Tommy provided an interesting insight in this area:

> The other support I would say would be my boss. She's allowed me to be very flexible in this job. She knows that I'll get the job done and knows that I do have children at home and that that [was] a priority when I first entered into this job, especially in this full time role. That was kind of part of the negotiations…was that, hey, I may not be in the office

9 to 5 every day, but I'm going to get the job done and I think she would support…. My

boss has been a big support in that area.

It is important to note all of the men included their supervisor as a primary support, but none of

the female participants did.

How do you balance your time between your work and family responsibilities?

Every participant smiled or laughed when they were asked this question. All of them

shared they do not think they are currently balancing their time well. Lori confessed, "Um, this

was definitely one that I posed before my husband to get his perspective on how he thinks I'm

doing, and the answer was 'not well.'" She went on to share how work was "winning" out over

her family responsibilities. Likewise, Claudia said:

I can do better on this. But I am also a perfectionist and I always think anything can be

done better. I think we do pretty good. I don't often compromise work. I would first

compromise family because I think when I am with my family I am highly intentional in

investing in them… with as much passion as I can, [so] that they don't question my love,

concern, or support of them.

Other participants, however, asserted their family is their number one priority; their

family will always win out. Dierdra clearly states, "…I'm never going to short my family." It is

interesting to note each of the female participants plainly stated which aspect of their life, either

family or work, was "winning." None of the men made that distinction.

In what ways, if any, has your family been positively and/or negatively influenced by you

working at this institution?

All of the participants who lived close to campus shared how beneficial it was for their

families to be able to take advantage of various activities and facilities the campus offers like

Airband, plays, musical concerts, the Student Activities Center, and the walking and biking paths

around campus. Dwight further elaborates this point:

…Last year, we took them to Airband and they were jumping up and down and for

probably two weeks after Airband. We listened to all those songs on iTunes over and

over again while they danced. And it was a three-year-old and a six-year-old at an

evening college event put on by students, and there was nothing that I had to censor or

cover the ears of these young children so they didn't have to hear. That was just kind of a

neat thing—basketball games, volleyball games, football games—I mean, all those

things, and…the community that's here…think about the other families that are here, the

friends my children have [whose parents also work at the studied institution]… that they

go to school with.

Matilda feels strongly the best way her family has benefited is having her child see an

example of a working mother. She stated, "…to know that I am teaching [my daughter] even

when perhaps I'm not with her and that she is learning and growing and developing was a really

important component [of my decision to work.] All of the women mentioned it was a benefit

their children saw a strong role model by their mothers working outside of the home.

In what ways, if any, has your work been positively and/or negatively influenced by your

working at this institution?

Many of the participants replied being a working parent at the studied institution has

positively influenced their work. For instance, Henry shared how being a parent has informed his

work with students:

I have thought of [some student-related situations] a lot differently now that I have [kids]

and some of my interactions with parents have been informed a little bit different [ly as

well]… I have had conversations with parents for eight years, but having my own son and having some conversations with fathers [has changed my perspective]. Hearing their heartbreak, I don't think that they prayed for their son any more than I pray for my son. But seeing some things that are heartbreaking that their son is involved in… that lends a little bit different perspective. So I would say that is a way that my family positively impacts the way I do this job because it helps me relate… that much more to parents that I interact with… I don't think that I was cold or heartless before but it does, well, it gives you another perspective…

Additionally, Lori had a similar experience:

I guess I have a new appreciation and understanding for the parent perspective that I didn't have before. I always felt like I was a compassionate person, but to really be able to put your mind there, especially parents in trusting other people, to [take care of] their child's well-being. Especially in my role, having to let parents know that their students will be safe and cared for and we'll do everything we can to make sure they're prepared [to participate in a campus activity] and that we have support systems in place to help them with what they might experience. …I definitely can relate to them and, therefore, be more patient with some of those communications then I would've been otherwise.

Henry and Lori were not the only ones who had this experience. Two other participants, whose jobs require them to work directly with students, also mentioned similar viewpoints. They believe they are better at working with students' parents due having children themselves.

Almost all of the participants declared they would spend even more time on their work responsibilities if they were not married or did not have children. For instance, Tommy said:

Well, I often say that if I was in this job and single and without kids that I'd probably take the world by storm. I mean, there's so much that can be done in my particular job with time…with just sheer time, I would be even better than what I am right now. And so, I obviously don't really want to answer that question that way, but I think that's the truth. If I didn't have a family I think my work would be advanced that much further, but that's not what I want.

All but one of the participants said they would be able to do more work if they did not have a family, though all of the participants were thankful they had a spouse and children.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

While every participant's experience was unique, many themes were revealed during the

nine interviews. These themes were determined by either frequency of the theme in the

interviews or the significance of the theme in a participant's experience. The themes that

emerged include:

- lack of models

- isolation

- calling

- family as a primary support

- proximity to campus

- finances and childcare

- enjoyment with their work at the studied institution

Lack of Models

A major theme was a lack of role models, as the participants had not seen adults who had

lived out their experiences before them. Specifically, there were few current employees who

were either working while their child or children were pre-kindergarten age or men whose wives

worked outside of the home. Lori is a twelve-month, full-time non-teaching faculty member. She

shared:

… I can think of no institutional examples of a working mother in a role like mine here.

So, the women are either single, they're married without kids, they don't work full-time,

or they're on an academic calendar. So… it really does send a message about maybe what

the institution values or what type of support is available. So, that's concerning, almost

like a defeatist attitude from my standpoint. Like, "There's no one doing it. Am I crazy

for trying it?" Because, clearly it doesn't work because I can find no examples of that.

Lori's comment exposed how deeply impacted many of the participants were not seeing anyone

else performing the same roles they are. As stated previously, college students need to see

examples of individuals balancing professional and domestic responsibilities because,

statistically, there are more and more mothers working outside of the home (Employment

Characteristics, 2008).   As an institution seeking to educate the whole person, it would be

prudent to ensure these parent-professionals will persist in their employment to serve as role

models for its students.

Similarly, one male participant, James, states:

… I'm thinking probably other people have said this but at least in this environment,

there are very few people that have gone ahead that have done something similar… So

that creates issues because there [are] only so many people that you can sort of ask

questions of and talk to and glean advice from – you know?   …If we were having this

conversation maybe 10, 15 years from now, I think it would be different because …the

baby boomer generation…was a generation [when] women started working. At least from

my understanding, [in] the Christian community, there was a backlash against that.   So I

think (the studied institution) really resembles that Christian community and so there

[are] very few women that have worked, I think. And so and I think in addition to that I

think for me as the husband, there's even fewer men that… are secure in themselves

enough to have their wives work. And so there [are] a number of people here who their

husband "allows" them to work and, um, I sense maturity and a security that they have

that other men don't have. And they also are really willing to…break some of the

traditional roles so I think the challenges are – there's a lack of people to talk to, there's a

lack of men to talk to specifically.

James' experience demonstrates how men, not only women, perceive the need for others to blaze

the trail before them. Moreover, James disclosed it is difficult for his wife to feel like she

belonged in the studied institution's campus and local community. She found it challenging to

find friends who "don't fit into the cookie cutter model." The participants' perception that the

common model for wives of men who work at the institution is to exclusively work within the

home. This standard creates a complex road for these women to navigate. This common set-up

causes women who choose to work to question their competency as a parent and as a

professional.

Isolation

Closely related to the lack of modeling is the second major theme, isolation. Specifically,

the women feel alone. Because their perception is very few other women who are sharing their

experience, they feel solitary in their day-to-day struggle. The busyness of their professional and

personal lives leaves very little time for a social life. The lack of friendship, both work and non-

work related, fuels some of this loneliness. Claudia explains:

…But then the isolation piece and the loneliness piece is that if I am not doing work here

I am with my kids and at my home which is something I chose and something I love,

something that is very fulfilling, but there is no time for myself. I mean none. I am not

even going to sacrifice an hour and a half to get a haircut. So it usually ends up to be

twice a year. (*Laughter)* Whoever is transcribing this is going to laugh. That is fine. But,

yeah, when I think about those challenges those would be…the fatigue, the balance,

complete balance issues, and the lack of personal time which results in isolation and

loneliness.

Claudia's position requires very demanding hours during various parts of the academic year. As

revealed in the quote, Claudia struggles to find time for herself. A perfectionist at heart, Claudia

never settles for less than 100% in her work.

Lori is a young mother in her first year of working and having a child. She said she only

had one friend who was also working outside of the home, but her friend recently quit her job

due to the intensity of trying to handle both responsibilities. Furthermore, Lori felt supported by

her colleagues and supervisor when she announced she was pregnant. She has not experience the

same level of support after her child was born. She discloses:

But, if someone would have just asked me, "How are you doing?" they would've seen the

whole picture. And no one ever asked that. So…yeah. [Through tears] I think that, you

know if someone would just ask a genuine, "How are you? How's it going?" that really

wanted to hear what the response was, and you know, made themselves available to

that…

This incongruence troubled Lori and deepened her feelings of isolation. The feeling of isolation

among new mothers is not uncommon. Humenick (2003) states, "Isolation is a frequently

mentioned and long-remembered issue of new mothers in the North American culture" (p. 1).

This study reveals it is not just new mothers who experience isolation.

Calling

The studied institution classifies itself as an evangelical Christian university. Faith is a

vital aspect of the campus community. A few of the women voiced how important their sense of

calling was in their professional lives. For instance, Claudia asserts:

First and foremost, absolutely feeling this is a calling and this is where God wants me to be and that in that calling he will equip us to handle these challenges. He will sustain us. And he will make it clear to us when we should not be in this situation... I know I need to be here and even in those really difficult times I know I am supposed to be here and so I need to keep moving ahead. That gets me out of bed [in the morning].

Matilda further supports this idea:

… if you're called to do it and you feel like God says, "Yes, you're a professional as much as you are a teacher, a mom… I have plans for you to impact a kingdom in this regard. I've called you, not your neighbor, not your mom… then he'll also make a way for that to happen". And you know I'd be lying if I said there were moments last semester that I was wondering if some of these bombshells weren't roadblocks that I should be taking note of in the other direction. But you know he keeps providing and so as long as he keeps doing that- we'll just keep chugging along. It's tough though. It's tough. Worth it...but tough.

These statements demonstrate why and how these female employees continue to serve students at this institution. God is central to the institution's mission and these women's purpose for working at this institution.

Proximity to Campus

The studied institution is in a rural town in the Midwest. This setting creates many positive and negative aspects for the participants of the study who are residents of this community. One of the most beneficial features for employees living near campus is the convenience with which they can travel back and forth between campus and home. Four of the

participants mentioned how important living close to campus is to their success in striking a healthy balance between work and family. Carl clearly articulates this point:

> I happen to live close [to campus], which is great. But people who commute, that can be a little more challenging. [My family] chose to live close because we value the effort it takes to have lunch together regularly and get home quickly for furnace issues and things like that. I drop one of my kids off at preschool sometimes and pick [him] up sometimes just to be as much help as I can be. It takes 5 minutes because I live close, but I couldn't do those things if I lived farther away, so I am thankful for that.

Claudia highlighted the same point:

> The proximity to my work [allows me to be] able to run home and see the kids if I have a half hour for lunch or lunch break at all…. I can take my child to preschool or to a babysitter if needed or if a babysitter needs a ride I can lend them my car because [he or she] is here on campus.

Practically, living near campus saves a lot of time. The lack of commute allows for more time for the employee to spend with his or her child(ren) and spouse. It is interesting to note some of the male participants whose wives stay home with their children mentioned living near campus has helped their wives and kids feel comfortable hanging out on campus and taking advantage of kid-appropriate campus events. In contrast, those who had a commute (30-60 minutes) had a more difficult time finding a balance between family and work responsibilities. Lori shares:

> I *am* in a unique situation—I have a long commute, so…that does not help. But, in reviewing my position I have to ask myself, "Would the commuting hours completely change my situation?" I know I need to move closer. I think that's the thing—if you're a working parent, you've got to be right by your job.

Later, Lori divulged she knows her family wants and needs to move closer to campus, but she is not sure where she would find the time to get her house ready to go on the market or look for housing options near the institution.

Family as Primary Support

Consistently throughout the interviews, all of the participants mentioned how their spouse and/or extended family were the participants' primary support. All of the women stated their husbands were their foremost sources of support, while three of the five male participants said their wives were a primary support. When asked what supports have helped him in his dual role as professional and father, Henry said, "First and foremost my wife. I couldn't do this in lots of literal and figurative ways without her..." Lori shared a similar sentiment:

I definitely turn to my husband who supports me 100%, and whatever I want to do, he'll support me, and he's behind me, but there's also only so much he can do. I mean, he's a working parent as well, but you know he doesn't—he can't fully understand because he doesn't have primary responsibility for [the baby] during the day. So, he's very understanding and supportive, but that doesn't always, can't always, literally put himself in my shoes.

Obviously, Lori's experience is different from Henry's in one crucial way – her husband works outside of the home, while Henry's wife does not. All of the female participants' husbands worked outside of the home, while only one of the male participants' wives worked full-time outside of the home. Two male participants were married to women who worked part-time. These differences have had a significant impact on these employees' experiences. Many of the male participants could feel confident their children were well cared for because they knew their

non-employed spouses were available full-time to meet this need. Knowing neither parent was available around-the-clock to provide childcare created additional stress for female participants.

Many of the participants communicated how helpful and supportive their extended family members have been, particularly with childcare. Matilda, a mother of one child, expressed her gratitude:

> …We're blessed with family in the area. Both of our parents are within a half an hour. And so you know they were very quick to jump to our rescue, especially when some situations arose that we didn't expect or anticipate or could not have planned for.

Tommy also emphasizes the importance of extended family:

> They have been willing to take the kids for an extended period of time. There [are] time[s when]… we both need to be away for extended periods of time... My parents are in a situation where my mom is retired and my dad still works, but they're just a couple hours away so they can, they literally become [our children's] parents for the week. More often than not [our children] go to my parents' home and… they've gone to her parents as well… Without that there are time[s when] there's no way we could have done this job. We do... use baby-sitters for the day-to-day stuff, but we can't ask a baby-sitter to come live in our house with our kids for an extended period of time. …Both sets of our parents are essential in allowing us to do our respective jobs….

All of the participants were fortunate enough to have at least one set of parents within a fairly short driving distance. This close proximity to their extended family certainly helps these employees make this arrangement "work." Of course, there is a small likelihood all parent-employees (current and future) of this university will live near family members. Due to this

limited likelihood, it is important for the institution to not only understand this additional challenge in the lives of these employees, but to consider ways to meet some of these needs.

Finances & Childcare

Five of the nine participants voiced concern about their salary and its ability to cover everyday living expenses and childcare costs. Dwight explained:

[Angie] and I together could do a lot more than we are right now, but we don't because…well, 1) It's expensive to have a baby sitter…2) Sometimes it's more work to have a babysitter… Well, it's probably more budget right now than anything. To do those evening events or weekend events comes at a financial cost.

He further shared he and Angie could not afford for her to "completely stay at home and not earn any income" so they decided to explore options for her to supplement their income.

Claudia and her husband are both Taylor employees. She expressed concern over their collective income and their ability to afford quality childcare. Next, she shared:

…If we want to save any money at all and we are driving a little car with two kids and a dog… I mean, people think we are crazy, but it's like we can't afford a car payment if we are paying babysitters. And we pay students for babysitters. So we are talking about a little less quality of care and [instead] piece hours together, which creates a lot of time and stress for us when they get sick or [the babysitter] forgets or they [the babysitters] are a little less on top of things. So trying to balance that has been very stressful. And trying to go semester-to-semester looking at kids' schedules and saying, "Ok, who is going to take care of our kids next semester?" There is not a good nanny type option. We are really not aware of any childcare options outside of one or two families [who are able to baby sit] but we need different working hours. We work at night as well as during the

day. So we need night options, [which] will always involve students, but it is just

constant changing of students for our kids. Which wears them down because they don't

know quite what to expect and if there were more compensation as it related to childcare

or the position in and of itself, we would be able to direct those monetary resource toward

having better childcare options for our kids which would make it less stressful on us and

on them.

In addition, Matilda stated:

There are very few childcare options and so at one point we thought we really would

have no [alternative] to bringing her to campus and actually that really did pan out.

There were no options in the area so we decide to stay closer to home and fortunately,

you know God willing – some things worked out and we have that taken care of but that

was a really big [issue] that I would say probably ranked at the top in terms of the most

challenging aspect of being a working parent. If I didn't know that my child was well

taken care of, how could I then be fully present in the classroom and really impact the

students and give 100%?

There are few childcare facilities in the small town of the studied institution. This presents a

tremendous challenge for these parents who must turn to non-family members to take care of

their children. Moreover, the services which are available have not been well advertised. This put

new employees who are also new to the community at a particular disadvantage. To compound

the issue further, many of these employees work during non-business hours and it is arduous

finding childcare for those non-traditional times. One study found family members, typically

grandparents, fulfill childcare duties during non-traditional working hours (Hunts & Avery,

1998).

Working from Home

As is common with many of the employees working at the studied institution, all of the participants articulated they consistently complete some of their work at home. For three of the participants working from home was part of their formal working arrangement with their supervisors. The other participants shared how they, at minimum, checked email from work every evening after traditional business hours. Matilda is one of the employees who works from home two days a week. She describes her experience:

> So I think most people would look at my schedule and they would say, "Oh, piece of cake – you teach 3 days a week and you're good, right?" I mean you look at the schedule on my door… I had a number of comments where people were like… "That's a great schedule… I'm grateful for it, but what most people don't recognize and… maybe I just don't turn it off but… my role never really ends. I'm checking e-mail when I first get up; I'm checking email right before I go to bed. And multiple times throughout the day because students expect immediate response… unless I'm really conscientious about putting it away as I mentioned like playing on the floor [with her child], then it really never ends. And so it's Saturday, unfortunately, sometimes it's Sundays – Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, whether I'm here or not.

Tommy is the other participant who has permission from his supervisor to work from both home and the office. He shared:

> I find myself anytime I have free time getting back into work, because of my situation I am allowed to work from home. I do work in my office as much as possible, but I am allowed to work from home quite a bit and that poses a problem in that we don't have a super large home so my laptop computer is right there, right there in the mix in the

middle of everything. So when I do have the opportunity, even when I'm in the middle

of playing with the kids and they go off to do something, I find myself going back to that

laptop computer, because in my line of work, there's constantly something that needs to

be done or can be done…

Lori highlights how working from home after 5:00 pm creates an escalating problem of students

and parents expecting her to work during those non-traditional hours:

…Probably I have contributed to that by responding at those times so that people think,

"Ok, she sends emails at 11 o'clock at night, so I can email her at 11 o'clock at night and

expect a response." So I think that's… not just the campus community, but instant

communication issues and what goes with that… but that's really hard on the family

perspective when you would like to really leave work at work, but you're kind of seen as

less of a worker if you don't readily get back to people, even if that's an evening or a

weekend. …I definitely email most weekends, but I'm not sitting at my computer

Beyond normal work expectations, many of the participants accomplished work-related

activities after their children went to bed, such as supervising practicum experiences or working

towards earning a doctorate. These extended work hours cause these parent-employees to have a

lack of leisure hours as well as time with their spouse. This, in turn, causes more emotional and

physical distress.

Implications for Future Research

In this study I examined the experiences of working parents with young children at a

Christian liberal arts institution. These experiences ranged from pleasant and uncomplicated to

difficult and complex. It is important to conduct another study and include participants from

even more areas on campus. It would be feasible to gather more data from all the parent-

employees (e.g. faculty, student development faculty, administrators, and staff) at the studied institution. This data should be collected both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Another approach for future research is to conduct a similar study at benchmark institutions. This information would help give a broader perspective concerning this topic. It would also give insight to see if other institutions' parent-professionals have similar experiences as those at the studied institutions do. In addition, it would reveal supports that have been helpful to the benchmark institutions' parent-professionals. This could allow the studied institutions to better support these employees which would lead to a healthier overall work environment.

Limitations

In this study I focused on the small demographic of working parents with children pre-kindergarten age. Employees who were parenting children of this age were chosen due to the intense hands-on care of children required at this level of development. These may include frequent diaper changes, meal preparation, and meal serving. Likewise, children who are pre-kindergarten age need consistent supervision to ensure their safety. While I could have conducted research to inlcude parents with children of any age, I chose to focus on this small group. This proves helpful in finding specific themes of experiences for parents of children pre-kindergarten age. However, in this study I did not provide thorough insight to all working parents' experiences at the studied institution.

All nine of the participants were employed at one small liberal arts Christian university in the Midwest. The sharply honed focus of my research is helpful to the studied institution through its provision of results directly pertinent to this university. Likewise, my research is more specifically developed with the Midwestern culture in mind, with attention to the nuances of a

small Christian academic community in this region. This limitation means the study cannot be replicated nor applied to any other setting.

This qualitative study does not seek to draw conclusions, but report the experiences of the participants. It required some participants to remember experiences and feelings they felt previous to the interview. Likewise the subjectivity inevitable in qualitative research allows for the possibility for less than empirically provable results. While quantitatively significant data cannot be drawn from this study, it reveals accurate perceptions of the participants' experiences. The purpose of this type of study is to provide a total understanding of the participants' experiences. Ultimately, the study is validated due to its ability "to gain 'real,' 'rich,' and 'deep' data" (Key, 1997).

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

Overall, the employees expressed their gratification in working at this institution, though many of them shared concerns or institution-specific challenges about their experiences as working parents. Lack of models, isolation, calling, proximity to campus, family as primary support, finances and childcare, and working from home all emerged as themes that were woven throughout the participants' stories. These themes can help the studied institution to create effective policies and procedures to help retain and support these valuable employees. For instance, the university could consider providing on-campus childcare for its employees' children to help mitigate the dearth of local childcare options. Likewise, it would be helpful to create an opportunity for working parents to meet and discuss their experiences. This might provide support and understanding, undercutting the feelings of isolation known by many of the participants. Lastly, further research is required in order to discover how better to support parent-professionals. As working while parenting becomes the "new norm", institutions of higher

education need to seek innovative and effective ways of supporting these parent-employees. Without the development of more family-friendly procedures, both families and institutions of higher education will continue to feel the stresses caused by the challenging balance facing those who are both parents and professionals.

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Appendix

Informed Consent

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of working parents at a Midwestern, Christ-centered institution. During this interview, you will be asked to answer a number of questions about your experience as an employee and a parent. The interview process will last between forty-five minutes and ninety minutes.

Interviews will be audio recorded, transcribed, and stored in a safe environment. All audio recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed when they are no longer necessary for this study. In addition, researcher advisors will be privy to transcriptions; however, pseudonyms will be used to protect anonymity.

There are minimal foreseeable negative repercussions of this study. If at any time, during or after the interview you feel uncomfortable you may decided to withdraw from the study. While this is a low risk interview, information about counseling services will be available upon request. Prior to finalization of the study, you will have the opportunity to review transcriptions and analysis.

If you have any questions about the research please ask the principle investigator before signing the informed consent form.

_____

I, _____, agree to participate in this research project. The research project has been adequately explained to me and my questions have been answered in a satisfactory manner. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate.

_____   _____

Participant's Signature   Date

_____

Principle Investigator's Signature   Faculty Supervisor:

Sara James, Graduate Student   Dr. Connie Lightfoot

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Appendix B

It is fitting I have written this surrounded by Sippy cups, crayons, and an impromptu barrier around our kitchen table (i.e. my office) made of chairs to keep my three-year-old son away from my computer. My gadget-loving toddler is obsessed with buttons and is quite techno-savvy, at least enough to quickly erase a document I have worked on for many long hours. I feverishly wrote this during Oliver's nap times and after his bedtime.

After I graduated from a CCCU institution, I immediately accepted a position as a Resident Director at a sister school. During my tenure at this institution, I married and had our first child. There were many times I felt isolated. While this is a common feeling among many new mothers, a key reason for my loneliness was I was the only female with a child on the Residence Life staff. There were many fathers on staff, but their daily experiences differed quite dramatically from mine. I never noticed or heard them asking the same questions I was asking about balancing my time, or the validity of their desire to work outside of the home. Nor were they experiencing the same type of peer scrutiny surrounding their decision. Among my eight close friends who graduated with me, I am the only one who desired and chose to work outside of the home even after my husband and I started our family.

By conducting this study, I hope to understand my own experiences and gain insight into how better to support and encourage my fellow co-workers who are parenting. Additionally, it is my goal to help Christian colleges and universities comprehend the challenges many of their employees are facing. Ultimately, my aim is to give a voice to these parent-employees' experiences and help them realize they are not alone.

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

1. What are the challenges you have faced as a working parent?

2. What supports helped you work through those challenges?

3. How do you balance your time between your work and family responsibilities?

4. In what ways, if any, has your family been positively and/or negatively influenced by you working at this institution?

5. In what ways, if any, has your work been positively and/or negatively influenced by your working at this institution?