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Work-Life Balance

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*This guest editorial is by **Geraldine L. Richmond** and **Celeste M. Rohlifing**. Richmond is the Richard M. & Patricia H. Noyes Professor of Chemistry at the University of Oregon and the director of COACh, a grassroots organization working to increase the number and career success of women scientists and engineers. Rohlifing is the deputy assistant director of the Mathematical & Physical Sciences Directorate at the [National Science Foundation](#).*

Equilibrium is defined as a state in which opposing forces or influences are balanced. Although the academic scientific enterprise prides itself on understanding these forces in laboratory systems, it has fallen short in recognizing and remedying the imbalance between the demands of career and those of personal life. This imbalance contributes to extreme professional sacrifices and lowered retention of many talented individuals striving for successful careers in science.

The National Science Foundation's Career-Life Balance Initiative, **launched in September 2011** at the White House with the first lady, Michelle Obama, is a notable federal agency step toward rectifying this imbalance. NSF policy currently permits no-cost extension of award duration for principal investigators (PIs) who take an extended leave of absence for dependent care responsibilities, as well as the use of award funds to temporarily replace project personnel who take a leave of absence because of dependent care responsibilities. NSF also offers flexibility in the start dates of its awards. And NSF CAREER PIs can now submit supplemental funding requests to support additional personnel (for example, research technicians or equivalent) for up to three months, for a maximum of \$12,000 in salary compensation, for the purpose of sustaining research when the PI is on family leave.

The commitment to work-life balance in academia has recently been reinforced by another organization in the federal government: the Office of Management &

Budget. OMB has released for public comment a new [circular on improved administration of federal grants and cooperative agreements](#). If implemented, it will allow inclusion of temporary dependent care costs directly resulting from travel to scientific meetings as an allowable travel cost, family-related leave as an allowable fringe benefit, and identification of locally available dependent care as an allowable meeting cost.

Academic institutions must also develop and implement clear, concise family-friendly policies that will assist graduate students, postdoctoral associates, technicians, and faculty in staying on their career track when faced with dependent care responsibilities. Last year, the grassroots organization [COACH](#) conducted a [Web-based survey](#) to learn how these groups combine family responsibilities and academic careers. Although sampling was not scientific because respondents were self-selected, the 300 responses provide a useful snapshot of views and concerns on these topics.

Some respondents stated that their institutions had developed family-friendly plans, but when asked about a series of specific policies, roughly half did not know whether their campuses or their departments had such policies. These numbers were highest for graduate students and postdoctoral associates. When policies are not written, documented, and readily accessible, inconsistencies in their implementation can occur. In fact, more than 70% of the survey respondents said that they find variability in family-friendly policies or procedures from one department chair to another. Respondents recommended that their institutions promote clear and consistent policies that are widely disseminated, more flexibility in scheduling, stable and well-supported leave policies, and accessible and affordable child care.

If federal agencies can make policy that helps support talented scientists to pursue their career dreams and have a family, so too can academic institutions. When it comes to work-life balance, particularly for graduate students and postdoctoral associates who are in their prime childbearing age, avoiding an open discussion and disregarding these very real challenges are out-of-date approaches. The time for action is now, and there is no better place to lead than from the chemistry community.

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