

Vice Presidents, Wives, and Moms: Reflections and Lessons Learned

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Pat's Story

Some people mark time by the events in their lives. My professional development and career has been marked by the birth and development of my daughter. She attended my master's level classes with me, well, sort of. I was pregnant during my last two semesters. As usual, I was working full time in student affairs and taking nine credit hours back-to-back in an attempt to finish before she was born. I was almost successful. She arrived in late December, and I had one class to take the following spring. When I was started working on my doctorate in 1984, my daughter was seven years old. Anxious to finish, I worked full time in student affairs and then took at least nine hours every semester until I finished, except for two semesters when I took 12 hours back-to-back. One semester for two nights a week, I traveled 75 miles each way to take classes, sometimes carpooling with Denise Gifford or Steve Milburn, fellow colleagues and students in the program. Although my focus was definitely not on being a wife and mother, I was still deeply hurt one day when my daughter told me that her teacher had asked, "What does your mommy do?" My daughter told me that she replied, "She goes to work, goes to school, and goes out of town." I know now why that teacher gave me such a disgusted look during parent-teacher conferences.

I had options, of course. We all do, presumably. My generation of females was told that we could have it all. The message I retained was that if I did not have it all, it was my fault. I was not smart enough, did not juggle well enough, or did not manage my time appropriately. I rejected all of my other options, including quitting my job and reducing my family's standard of living, thus impacting my daughter in a different way. I could have reduced my commitment to my position, affecting my personal sense of honor and integrity. I could have taken fewer classes and thus longer to graduate, extending the absences from home over a longer period of time and perhaps

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missing out on opportunities that I imagined would be more readily available once I had earned a terminal degree. No, I wanted to have it all, and as a result, had little of nothing.

On those nights that Denise and I rode together, we often reflected on our children's lives and what we were missing by working full time and going to graduate school full time. We reflected on the essential goodness of our spouses, neither of whom had graduate degrees, but who were still thrilled that we wanted to be "doctors." Mainly, Denise and I talked about guilt. It was the guilt that we could not balance everything to our satisfaction and the potentially horrendous impact on our children due to their lack of a traditional mother role model in their formative years.

After graduation, I moved to a dean of students position with responsibilities to be on call 24/7. I left home in the middle of the night too many times to remember because of a student crisis, secure that my husband would get our daughter off to school and even pick her up from daycare if I did not return by early evening. My performance at work was important to me, and sometimes my relationship with my daughter suffered as a result. I recall one day when she called me at work from school to say that she needed another blouse. Due to some mishap, she had gotten blood on her blouse and had torn it so that she felt it was no longer modest. I remember telling her that I had a meeting in 10 minutes that my staff assistant had worked weeks to schedule and could she simply borrow a jacket from another student to wear over her blouse? Her disappointment was palpable. She said, "Any of the other kids' mothers would come to school if this happened to them. I guess I am not as important as your meeting," and then she hung up on me. I do not recall if she tried to call her dad or not. Perhaps he was not available. I went to the meeting, but I was so upset after the conversation with my daughter that I had difficulty concentrating. I knew I could have delayed the meeting. Few meetings are so important that they could not be rescheduled or that a subordinate could not handle and handle well.

I always felt that my gender meant I had to work harder and be seen as more responsible and reliable than my male counterparts. This feeling was likely self-imposed, but it was also very real. I remember waiting for a male leader at my institution who was running over an hour late for a meeting. He showed up and instead of apologizing, he said that his wife, who was a full-time homemaker, was out of town and his kids wanted pancakes for breakfast. There was a murmur in the audience and everyone smiled. I figured they were thinking, "What a great dad!" If I had been an hour late in order to do something for my daughter, my perception was that the same people would have been disgusted that I had allowed my personal life to take precedence over my professional responsibilities. Instead of everyone's thinking, "What a

great mom!” they would have been thinking, “She needs to plan her time better.”

In my opinion, this paradigm continues to exist in the workplace today. If a man asks to take off early to go to his kid’s soccer game, everyone admires him. On the other hand, if a woman asks to take off early to go to her kid’s soccer game, everyone wonders if she is committed enough to her position. I do not know why this imbalance persists.

My daughter has since graduated from college and is now on her own. I have senior student affairs responsibility and have the opportunity and the obligation to make the path better for my subordinates. Recently, one of our staff members had her second child and tendered her resignation. Rather than accept her resignation, I proposed that she work from home three days a week. We agreed that such an arrangement was a win-win for her and for the university. Other times, I have suggested to staff members that they work fewer hours and spend more time with their families. If there is anything that I have learned, it is that I do not regret having spent more time at work; however, I deeply regret that I did not spend more time with my family. If I had spent more time with my family, I do not think my professional life would have suffered. I think it would have actually enhanced my professional life because I would have been happier because my family would have been happier. I would have been living a life congruent with my values. In the end, this congruence is all we can hope for.

From my experiences, I would offer the student affairs professionals the following suggestions for achieving balance in their lives:

1. Maintain the same expectations for all staff members, whether single or partnered. Do not expect the single staff members to volunteer for all the late night and weekend activities.
2. Offer flex-time and other options for staff members with family or partner responsibilities. More and more staff members need time to assist elderly parents, who may live a long distance away.
3. For staff members with parenting responsibilities, offer different work hours, for example, a later starting time or an earlier ending time. For dual career families, offering an earlier starting time and an earlier ending time allows one parent to spend after school time with their child so they can avoid the “latch key” syndrome.
4. In departments where there are more late night and weekend events, ask staff members from other departments to “pinch hit” from time to time.

5. Allow staff members with sick children or parents to work from home for brief periods of time, without expecting them to charge the time to sick or vacation leave.
6. Ask staff members who are working on undergraduate or graduate degrees how you can be more supportive. Be sure to publicly recognize these staff members and their goals so other staff can also be supportive.
7. Recognize that being a good mother is as important as being a good father.
8. Encourage staff members to bring their children to work on occasion during less busy periods. This reminds everyone that our first responsibility is to our children and our families or significant others.

Jackie Kennedy Onassis said that it does not matter how successful you are in life if your children do not turn out well. I have been lucky. In spite of my educational and professional aspirations, my child has turned out well, and that accomplishment is what I am proudest of.

Denise's Story

My 25 years in student affairs can be described as the juggling of balls amidst a whirlwind of student crises, fraternity hazing, new presidents, disciplinary hearings, and student protests. The juggled balls, of course, represent my husband of 27 years and my three children. For many years, both of my parents were in my juggling routine as well, as they struggled with terminal illnesses.

The real juggling for me began as the pace quickened in the 1980's when I decided to pursue a doctorate in higher education. My husband and I had two daughters, the younger of whom was less than a year old; I drove home daily at noon to breastfeed her. While the first few classes Pat and I took together are a blur in my memory, I do remember the same daughter, at 18 months, clinging to my legs, crying and begging me not to leave for another evening class.

Throughout this period, my work in a dean of students role was a fast-paced life of nighttime telephone calls and weekend and evening events, once punctuated by a bullet as a student was shot at a campus event. The subsequent campus investigations by the Office of Civil Rights, regular student protests on campus, fraternity hazing, and conflict mediation added additional volume and speed to the whirlwind within which I valiantly continued to juggle.

While the whirlwind raged, there were many moments of calm as well. I spent many evenings on campus and as often as possible took one of my children. Taking them both allowed me to get some individual time with me and familiarized them with my work, making them feel at home on campus. For a

number of years, my daughters and I sat in the front row every evening of annual sorority rush and experienced the skits and positive energy together. We would talk on the way home about which group they liked best and why. Often their babysitters were members of one group or another, so that sorority became the hands-down favorite.

After the coursework for my doctorate, I worked diligently to prepare for my oral and written comprehensive exams. These terrified me much more than writing a dissertation sometime in the future. After existing in a fog of preparation for months, I passed both written and orals and looked forward to a short, calm respite in the juggling act. Soon, however, I was pregnant with our son. All the balls that I had so skillfully kept in the air came crashing down around my feet. The prospect of a new baby and a dissertation added to the balls, already being juggled precariously, would undoubtedly do me in. I remember sitting on our home's front steps, sobbing at night after everyone else was asleep.

The next years flew by with my dissertation, baby boy, and appointment as acting vice president for student affairs. Unless one of the children was sick, the balls stayed in the air pretty well, with only an occasional low catch. When one was sick, however, the whole set of balls tumbled down, as my husband and I figured out who would miss work. Generally, it was the one who had not been up all night, nursing a sick child.

My children are older now, and the only person I dress in the morning these days is myself. Throughout those busiest whirlwind years (which continue to blow, but at a slightly decreased pitch), I often felt guilty and overwhelmed. Yet, at the same time, I felt successful, intellectually challenged and blessed to be the first woman vice president for student affairs at the University of Louisville.

Distance and time allow us to see the events with a deeper and clearer perspective. From my experiences over time, my perspective has taught me the following lessons:

1. After years of feeling guilty about leaving my middle child to go to class as she clung to my legs and cried, I recently asked her to tell me about her feelings at that time. I braced myself for a barrage of criticism and mom guilt. After responding with a blank stare, my daughter told me that she was unable to remember anything about my years as a student. In fact, she had only a blurry memory of the graduation ceremony but nothing much prior to that time! I had experienced tremendous guilt over the experience for nothing!

Lessons Learned: I have learned that children are much more resilient than moms are when it comes to managing our role guilt. My daughter remembers

only that Dad or Mom was home all the time and wonders why I would feel guilty at all.

2. My children all have wonderful, detailed memories of the campus events they attended with me - the sorority rush, the international banquets, the singing competitions, the hypnotists, and the plays.

Lesson Learned: I have learned that a coping strategy I used to keep another ball in the air was a boon to each of them and was something that enriched each of their young lives. They can still all sing, with great abandon, the Delta Upsilon theme song, with associated hand movements, and read Greek letters as if they were Greek scholars, although none of them became members of a sorority or fraternity.

3. My children all communicate deeply with me on any number of issues that teens and young adults face. Sometimes they refer their friends to me for advice. "Talk to my mom," they'll say. "She has seen and heard everything, and she won't over-react."

Lesson Learned: I have learned that the exposure to the challenging issues student affairs professionals face daily helps us keep their issues in perspective.

4. My children know that, even though my profession is important to me, family is the most important, and I will drop everything to protect or defend them if necessary.

Lesson Learned: I have learned by watching them that exposure through me to student issues has helped my children to gain the skills and identify the steps necessary to work out problems. They don't need me to swoop in nearly as often now.

In retrospect, I am pleased with the choices and trade-offs made along the way. It is clear to me now that providing a loving environment for a child's growth is more important than being omnipresent. I have learned that children are remarkably more resilient than I had once believed, and the benefits of our work are many. In retrospect, I can see that guilt played a much larger role in my life than it should have. The lessons I have learned have helped me put my guilt associated with motherhood and career into a healthy perspective. My hope is that younger women, including my own daughters, are able to find this viewpoint much earlier in their life that I did in mine.