AN OLD MALE ECONOMIST’S ADVICE TO YOUNG FEMALE ECONOMISTS

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Much of the advice that junior female economics Ph.D.s should heed is the same as one would offer to male economists: Work 60 hours a week, with the research/teaching mix depending on the teaching load at your school; keep exposing your ideas to seminar audiences at home, at conferences and at national and international meetings; aim your submitted publications high, and don’t be discouraged by journal rejections. Within this broad advice, though, there is a wide range of issues that my observation of contemporaries and young female colleagues suggests are specific to women. These potential female-specific problems arise the first day of grad school; but I deal with them “only” from the time the young woman becomes an economist—when she has passed her prelims and starts dissertation work.

The choice of dissertation topic and specific subject is important (although not so important that anyone should dither over it for years!). In the 1960s and 1970s a large fraction of (the relatively small representation of) female economists chose “women’s topics”—female labor force behavior, gender discrimination, economics of the family, etc. The fraction is smaller today, but such topics are still disproportionate among new female Ph.D.s. Of course you should work on what interests you—otherwise you are unlikely to complete a thesis; but the scarcity value of working in an area where women are under-represented—theory, econometrics, international economics—should not be underestimated. At the margin the potential benefits of this scarcity make it worth choosing such areas and avoiding those that are crowded with women.

Don’t hide from your thesis advisor; a guaranteed way to slow progress on a dissertation, or even derail it, is to avoid frequent meetings with your advisor. My experiences suggest that this is more of a problem for female grad students, perhaps because of their mistaken view that their ideas must be very well formulated before presenting them.
Your advisor expects/wants to spend time with you; and trying out ideas is essential to their development and improvement.

In rare cases advisors and other faculty may be sexual predators—their interest in dealing with you goes beyond the professional. Such activity should lead to revocation of tenure, as it potentially clouds the advisor-advisee relationship for all students. It behooves you, if you reasonably believe that you have confronted such behavior, to have a confidential talk with a trusted senior faculty member. For your sake and that of your fellow and future students, don’t put up with unprofessional behavior. More commonly, advisors or other faculty may take female students less seriously than males. This is a lesser problem, but it is also harder to handle. The best solution is to be persistent and adopt a tone and conversational strategy that help make sure your ideas are heard.

As a young faculty member you are likely to be the only woman in your department or one of very few. You are there to be an academic economist—to teach and do research, not to represent a “woman’s view” to your colleagues or to your students. Nonetheless, your near gender uniqueness always puts you in the spotlight and creates pressures on you that should be resisted. Occasional counsel from women in related departments on your campus can be helpful.

University administrators love committees that are balanced by gender; but the relative supply of women, especially from economics departments, is small. Even as a junior professor you may be asked to serve on university- or college-wide committees, a request that is flattering. Don’t be flattered—avoid these like the plague unless the exposure/effort ratio is huge. The time spent on them eats up research time and usually generates minimal credit in your tenure decision. Requests like this are another form of sexual exploitation.
Even within a department junior female faculty are disproportionately asked to do administrative/committee work. Some of this is probably OK, and some credit is given at tenure time. Here too, though, the excess demand is not something you should give in to. And doing stereotypical committee work—nurturing undergraduates or grad students, being the secretary of a committee—is a particularly bad idea.

Until recently young female faculty members occupied the two offices next to mine. The constant stream of students during their office hours was striking, as was their willingness to talk with students for long periods outside regular office hours. Students don’t view old guys as mother figures—even teaching huge classes my office hours are only crowded before exams. Many students apparently believe that you are there to nurture them, but you are not their mother. Seeing them outside of a restricted set of office hours; devoting excessive amounts of time to substantive questions by one or a few students, and dealing with their personal problems (a job best left to your institution’s counseling service) all do a disservice to other students and to yourself.

I’ve seen male students attempt to bully young professors, especially women, into allowing more points on exams, providing extra exam time, postponing exams, and other grade-badgering. This subtle, and often less subtle coercion doesn’t belong in a university. Giving in to such requests often means more work for you and gives the student the idea that he (once in a while she) can play the system. You are the authority, and erring on the side of toughness with such students will save you further troubles.

When I was a new associate professor, one student asked, “Are you a real professor?” I finally inferred that she wondered if I was a faculty member or a TA. For young women, especially those who look even younger than their age, it is crucial to establish social
distance from students, even grad students and TAs. They are not your colleagues or your pals. Professional dress can help reinforce the distinction in students’ minds.

Most generally, and crucially if you are in a heavily research-oriented department, make it clear by your manner and your behavior to your students and your colleagues that teaching and all it entails is only one of your professional activities. In such a department any faculty member who devotes more than 20 hours a week to teaching, preparation and office hours is not likely to have enough time for all the other professional activities that will lead to tenure and make you a respected scholar. Time spent on teaching beyond that is not rewarded; indeed, it is not clear that it even raises your instructional productivity. The optimal mix is different in liberal-arts colleges; but there too research accomplishments are increasingly expected and require substantial time inputs.

Readers and tenure referees tend to assume that a young economist who coauthors with a more senior economist, especially a thesis advisor, is doing the dirty work rather than providing the central innovation of the study. This is regrettably especially true when the junior person is a woman and the senior economist is male. It is important to become an independent researcher—to leave the nest of one’s dissertation advisor’s ideas and co-authorships—well before tenure time, and that is particularly so for women. Beyond that I see little in areas of professional endeavor outside the department or university where young women economists need advice different from young men.

I have not mentioned the “C word”—children. In a recent time-budget survey married women with kids under 18 spent over three times as many minutes per day on childcare as their husbands. Although young female economists may have sensitive husbands and greater intra-household incentives to share childcare more equally, I have met none who provides demonstrably less than half the childcare; and most do much more than
half. I doubt that this will change soon, but at least there are things you can do to reduce the unequal sharing of the burden (and also, one should point out, of the joys).

Louis XIV remarked that he couldn’t reward someone whom he didn’t see at court at Versailles. Implicitly the same thing is true in academe. Even with kids it is important for young female professors to attend seminars by internal and external speakers, to interview job candidates at the January meetings and to talk with them during campus visits. More generally, despite your extra family burdens you must take full part in the professional life of the department and to engage in activities that generate the “bonding” that is crucial in any work environment. This is difficult indeed, but it is necessary in tenure-track positions at an increasing number of both “research” and “teaching” institutions. While senior economists recognize the burdens of motherhood and childcare intellectually, the evidence in Saranna Thornton’s discussion in this Newsletter suggests that at tenure time they are not always able to accord them full weight. One hopes, however, that unvoiced sentiments and even comments, like that from a department chair to a job candidate in the late-1980s, “Anyone serious about getting tenure should not ask about paid leave and would not have children,” are becoming scarcer.

I doubt that the need for gender-specific professional advice is going to disappear soon. But I am optimistic enough to believe that the greater representation of women (AEA membership up from 7 percent in the 1960s to 17 percent today) and the growing number of young female role models will reduce the productivity of such counsel. The size of the reduction will partly be the endogenous result of how you and your peers integrate yourselves into professional life.