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# The confluence of family and academic lives: Implications for assessment practices of college student learning in higher education institutions in the United States



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## ABSTRACT

Studies on family–work conflict among higher education faculty focus exclusively on research or promotion-related work outcomes and find significant challenges in balancing these two spheres. To extend this line of research, this study shifts the focus to classroom practices known as learnercentered assessment (LCA) and estimates the statistical association between marriage and parenthood and the use of these LCA practices in undergraduate classrooms. The hypotheses are framed around role theory and tested using data on a representative sample of U.S. faculty from the 2004 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty and hierarchical linear regression techniques. The results return quite disparate gendered patterns. For males, marriage and parenthood are associated with reduced used of LCA practices in undergraduate courses. For females, parenthood but not marriage is associated with greater use of LCA practices. All regression results remain robust after adjusting for a wide range of individual and institutional characteristics. These results align with previous research showing that the work and family lives of faculty are indeed entwined. However, this entanglement may have quite different and significant implications for male and female faculty within the institution of higher education, as this study suggests.

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## 1. Introduction

Work and family institutions are greedy because both want workers' investments in time and energy (Coser, 1974). The institution of higher education is no exception as full-time faculty often work 55–65 h workweeks in their roles of teaching, research, service, and advising (Jacobs & Winslow, 2004; Misra, Lundquist, & Templer, 2012). Lengthy workweeks trigger issues in balancing work

and family roles especially due to the lack of work norms that lead faculty to work during weekends and holidays (Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013). Previous research on U.S. faculty focuses on how marriage and parenthood statuses influence merit, promotions, and research outcomes. Research is lacking on whether family life is associated with pedagogical practices in higher education. To this end, the present study uses data from the 2004 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty and focuses on classroom practices known as learner-centered assessment (LCA). The analysis is limited to full-time faculty from 4-year institutions to guard against differences between 2- and 4-year institutions and part- and full-time faculty.

LCA activities are viewed as necessary for effective pedagogy and student learning (Armbruster, Patel, Johnson, &

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Weiss, 2009), but LCA is a generalized concept as there are no absolute activities that comprise the concept. Huba and Freed (2000: 12) operationally define LCA as an activity that involves students more deeply in the learning process and promotes higher-order thinking, such as peer evaluations, competency based grading, and multiple drafts of student work (Mino, 2004). Thus, a focus on LCA practices is imperative for four reasons. First, there is a consensus that effective pedagogy includes teaching and assessment. Second, LCA practices promote students' cognitive and noncognitive growth and higher rates of graduation. Third, LCA practices allow students to assume greater control over their learning and become more self-directed, autonomous, and self-regulatory. Fourth, the accountability movement is now demanding that faculty use effective assessment through active learning assignments and practices to promote deeper learning and better retention (Hu & McCormick, 2012; NRC, 2012; Persellin & Daniels, 2014; Reindl & Reyna, 2011).

## 2. Background

### 2.1. LCA practices

LCA activities are student centered, pedagogically effective high impact good practices for assessing student learning (Hu & McCormick, 2012; Huba & Freed, 2000; Kuh, 2008). LCA is an effective assessment tool because it encourages the use of multiple methods to gather richer evidence of learning. Multiple methods better engages students with content and activates different areas of the brain to increase the likelihood that deeper learning occurs (Nilson, 2010). Feedback on these activities from faculty and peers yields comprehensive assessment information for analyzing, discussing, and evaluating a learner's performance on a set of critical learning skills. This definition places LCA squarely within the learner-centered paradigm endorsed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (Kuh, 2008). Thus, an activity is LCA if it involves movement towards learner-centered assessment which encourages critical thinking, application of knowledge to contemporary and discipline-specific issues, collaborative learning, and reflection on and integration of feedback (Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009; Suskie, 2009). For faculty, LCA practices encourage a more formative approach to assessment that occurs throughout the learning process without relying on students' recollection of facts (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). The learning activities measured in the National Survey of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF) are widely regarded as student-centered and appear in previous research (Webber, 2012; Yanowitz & Hahs-Vaughn, 2007).

### 2.2. Prior studies

Nearly all research finds positive outcomes among undergraduates exposed to NSOPF-type LCA practices, including greater levels of engagement, learning, and persistence in the course and college (Banta et al., 2009; Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley, 2008; Gasiewski, Eagan, Garcia, Hurtado, & Chang, 2012). See Andrews, Leonard,

Colgrove, and Kalinowski (2011) for an exception. While there are clear benefits for using active learning strategies to promote better student learning and outcomes, the use of LCA practices may require substantial investments in classroom preparation, faculty-student contact in and out of the classroom, and development of new teaching skills (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005; Skelton, 2007). The time commitments to fully implement LCA may contribute to family-work life issues, although there is no known research examining the associations between family life and LCA or even general teaching practices. Therefore, no direct empirical evidence exists to guide this study. Several studies using NSOPF examine how other variables shape the use of LCA, which is used here to select the control variables. For example, LCA use is greater for female faculty than male faculty, those who teach more credits, in private and non-doctoral granting institutions, and in non-science fields. (Webber, 2012; Yanowitz & Hahs-Vaughn, 2007).

The foci of existing studies examine research and promotion-related outcomes with an emphasis on male-female differences or women faculty only. Recent studies are not definitive, though. For example, Hesli and Lee (2011) find that married faculty and parents publish more peer-reviewed articles than non-married faculty and those with no or fewer children whereas Hunter and Leahey (2010) find that research productivity declines after parenthood, especially for females. Similarly, even though Morrison, Rudd, and Nerad (2011) find that marriage and parenthood are generally more deleterious for a woman's academic career than for a man's, Mason et al. (2013) find that marriage and parenthood can be advantageous for women and disadvantageous for men.

## 3. Theoretical framework and development of hypothesis

### 3.1. Theoretical framework

This study uses role theory typical of research on work-family dynamics, and includes topics of role conflict, role allocation, and gender role norms (Powell & Greenhaus, 2010). Individuals face role demands and responsibilities at work and at home. As these demands intensify and conflict with each other due to the acquisition of new roles, individuals find themselves making time and effort allocations and compromises. These decisions are influenced by a complex set of objective and subjective factors including the real and perceived availability of resources, benefits and costs of actions taken and not taken, role expectations, and the normative gendered life courses and scripts differentially experienced by men and women (Moen, 2011; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010).

Examining how family characteristics influence work decisions and outcomes, Greenhaus and Powell (2012: 246) label this approach the "family-relatedness of work decisions." The bundle of marital and parenthood demands requires individuals to evaluate the implications of their work decisions on family life. Individuals use the effort-reward structures at work to make decisions about how to engage in a particular work role (Greenhaus & Powell, 2012). This is true for higher education where

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