



[Office Directory](#)
[President's Office](#)
[Dean of Faculty](#)
[Organization Chart](#)
[Faculty Directory](#)
[Staff Directory](#)

[Centers & Institutes](#)
[Libraries](#)
[Special Services, Resources & Facilities](#)
[Shared Resources](#)

[President's Office Home](#)
[President's Bio](#)
[Annual Reports](#)
[Speeches](#)
[Writings](#)
[In the News](#)
[Pitzer College Tactical Plan 2004-2009](#)
[President's Student Office Hours](#)



President's Writings

The Facts of Life for an Administrator and a Mother

The biological aspects of motherhood are not going to change. But what is changing — and growing — is the number of women in administrative positions at colleges and universities. It is crucial, therefore, that higher-education administration become a gender-neutral environment, where the facts and necessities of motherhood can be easily blended into the work routine.

My moment of epiphany came when I was sitting in an academic council meeting late in the summer of 1996. The provost, three deans, and myself, the assistant provost, were discussing important business, and we were all very focused. Well, they were. I, the only woman in the room, was distracted by one of the consequences of being a nursing mother and a full-time professional who works for long stretches in the presence of others, without a privacy break: My left breast was full, hardening into mastitis.

Obviously, I needed to leave the room. Was anyone else in the group a potential ally, who would understand my predicament? Among them, these four men had nine children. As far as I knew, their wives had never worked outside the home. I thought for a moment about the provost, who was closest to me in age. Over the two years that we had worked together, I had seen his three young sons in the office just once, when he had forgotten his lunch. He called his wife and asked her to deliver it to him. A few minutes later (the family lived just blocks away from the campus) his wife drove over and sent up his bagged sandwich with their sons while she waited in the car. In marked contrast to his family's absence from his office space, my 4-month-old son visited me daily with his sitter for his noontime nursing, and I had delegated one chair in my tiny office to hold his baby quilt and various plush toys and teething chewies.

I considered interrupting the conversation about full-time equivalent students and retention rates by casually saying something like, "Say, you're going to have to count me out for the next 15 minutes, guys. I've either got to latch on a breast pump or I'm going to be writhing in agony." I looked into their serious faces and attempted to predict the general reaction. Maybe not. I wondered, rather resentfully, why, shortly before the millennium, I felt so stifled, so inhibited about announcing something so natural.

I was feeling trapped between the imperative of biological necessity, which I could not deny much longer, and the gender-based pressure on me to demonstrate at every turn that motherhood would not "interfere" with my professionalism. Suddenly I was confronted with the reality of what lactating motherhood could symbolize in an instant, what it would communicate — that no matter how much I tried to be part of the group, I really was different, and difference in this milieu was not welcome. When I fantasized explaining why I had to leave the room, I imagined that there would be a moment of accommodation

-- serious, enthusiastic, joking, embarrassed, or some combination of those -- to my need. Then I would leave the room. Would that create a vacuum that might invite comment? Maybe no one would say anything. Maybe they would be politically correct, gracious, indulgent, silent, awkward. I'd never know.

My rational side recognized that while women obviously had become a presence in the administrative workplace, certain aspects of that environment still needed to evolve. At the same time I understood that while some changes had taken place, any statement within a workplace that called attention to fundamental biological distinctions between men and women represented a no-win proposition. I then realized that the buzzing in my head couldn't be blamed on sleep deprivation or a clogged duct. What I was hearing was the collision of male and female professional work environments. The work environment I was in at the moment was one where you thought twice about drawing attention to certain culturally sexualized details of your own anatomy.

While it gradually has become institutionally acceptable for women in the faculty ranks to inquire whether benefit packages include family leave (not necessarily using such a leave, mind you, because of fears of generating colleagues' animosity), the administrative environment is not a welcoming one for such inquiries. Can you imagine someone interviewing for a dean's or vice president's position asking about that particular college's family-leave policy for administrators or about the availability of places on the campus to nurse? That gap belies the facts that more women are having babies in their late 30s and early 40s, just at the time they could be ready to enter the administrative ranks.

When I became pregnant in July 1995, I waited for two months before informing the president of my college. Then I walked into his office one day, got the usual rhetorical "How are you?," and responded lightly, "Great -- I'm pregnant." My reply caught him off guard. Looking shocked, he said: "I never think of the president's staff getting pregnant." He then recovered and told me what wonderful news it was, assuring me he would be supportive in any way he could. My work schedule was very heavy at the time, and I was determined to maintain it. All went well until the end of my fifth month, when I began having contractions (which eventually were stopped with medication). My doctor insisted that I cut back my work hours. I met with the provost (a woman who left at the end of the year, before the fateful council meeting I described earlier) and told her that I would need to work at home two days a week. She assured me that this would present no problem, and went on to discuss the need for me to assume additional duties.

I spent the next four months in terrible pain; however, I continued to go to work three days a week. About a month before I gave birth, the provost began hinting that other administrative staff members were concerned that their workload might increase once I went on leave. (At that time, the college had no paid family leave. You had to use your sick leave, and if that ran out, you had to petition for an unpaid leave of absence.) Because of that added pressure, I wrote a plan detailing how my area could be covered while I was on my eight-week "sick leave," and, even though my doctor recommended bed rest, I continued coming in to the office until I went into labor. While I had intended to use two months of accumulated sick leave, a series of events occurred at the college that compelled me to return after only six weeks.

Both the president and provost had spent a great deal of time that year away from the college, searching for other jobs, and both had accepted presidencies elsewhere while I was on leave. That meant that their positions would need to be filled on an interim basis. The result was that most of the administrative staff members were bumped up to fill vacancies: The vice president for student affairs became the interim president, and the associate provost became the interim provost. I was the lone exception. Caught up in mysterious and suspect motherhood, I remained in place. It's an old story, I know, but that was not the primary story of my record as an administrator.

That was the year when I had designed and implemented a new midyear term that generated crucial additional revenue because of increased student enrollment; created a new travel grant for faculty members; organized an international conference on 20th-century American literature at the college; and had been recognized by the American Association of University Women for creating and administrating a successful faculty-mentoring program. I was also serving as the executive director of the Northeast Modern Language Association and organized its annual spring conference. (I was unable to attend the conference because my son had arrived four days earlier.) Yet in my annual review, the provost was critical of my performance and recommended that I be kept at the assistant-provost level for an extended period of time.

What I still find fascinating about this particular episode is that there was public support for my newly achieved maternal status. An office baby shower was thrown for me, attended by all the administrators, yet my darling domestic quality was deemed inverse to my competency as a professional. When it came to professional advancement and my administrative future at the college, clearly pregnancy and motherhood were liabilities. I discovered that during my pregnancy and in the first few months after my son was born, people appeared to automatically assume that I was not working full time, not working as hard as I once did, as hard as I ought to be. My reaction to my lack of promotion, quite understandably, was to look for another job. But I found that while my *vita* attracted positive attention, my motherhood did not.

Early in my search, the provost of a college where I had applied for a dean's position called me. He was very encouraging, described in detail the college's programs and faculty (including many female faculty members, he was proud to tell me), and asked if I had any questions. I inquired about available child care. That stumped him. He told me he had no idea, but he bet his secretary would know. In another search, I was a finalist for associate vice president for faculty advancement. When the call came inviting me for a campus visit, a student employee in my office answered and gave the following reply to the search-committee chairman's request to speak with me: "Dr. Skandera Trombley just had a baby, and she's home with him today." The committee chairman then called me at home and began our conversation by congratulating me on the birth of my son. Even though the cat was out of the bag, I agreed to the on-campus interview. I was still nursing at the time, and when I received the interview schedule I was alarmed to see only one 15-minute break. I felt that I simply could not call the search-committee chairman and ask him to schedule nursing breaks. Suffice it to say, by the end of the day I was in agony. I decided to delay my job search for a year.

Now let's return to where I began my story, that 1996 academic council meeting. After much internal debate, I finally decided to tell the men in the room that I had to make an important phone call and quickly excused myself. In other words, I lied to avoid calling attention to my gender. Yet for the remainder of my time at that institution, I worked hard not to worry about what my colleagues might think of my compromised dedication or competency as a mommy-track executive.

Seven years later, the stigma of maternity has ebbed, but not the lessons that I learned. I left the college in the summer of 1997 and spent five years as vice president for academic affairs and dean of the faculty at Coe College. During my first year at Coe, I and a group of faculty members created a paid-family-leave policy. Last summer I accepted the presidency at Pitzer College, a forward-thinking liberal-arts institution. Last fall, Pitzer was awarded an honorable mention from the Association of American University Women for its innovative primary-caretaker leave program, which allows a college employee 18 weeks of paid leave at 75 percent of his or her salary. Faculty members working toward tenure may choose to stop the tenure clock while on leave, and the leave is available to both men and women, spouses and domestic partners. The plan was in place when I arrived, and I'm proud to recommend it as a national model.

Even with these important signs of progress, my journey as a working mother of a hale and hearty 7-year-old is by no means over — I am fully aware that I continue on a path less traveled by women. I suggest that administrators work together to seize this "teachable moment" to create work environments for real people in the real world.

*<http://chronicle.com>
Section: The Chronicle Review
Volume 50, Issue 2, Page B12*

From the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, issue dated September 5, 2003

[◀ Back to President's Office Home](#)

Pitzer College Home
Alumni / Current Students / Faculty & Staff /
Parents & Family / Prospective Students

© 2005 Pitzer College • 1050 N. Mills Ave • Claremont, CA • 91711 • Tel
909.621.8000

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.daneprairie.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.