Scientists Choose Motherhood," is striking for the variety of interventions it proposes: changes to hiring, tenure and leave policies; the introduction of new grant administration, childcare, and tele-commuting options... picture it: what a transformation!

But really, if we think about it, a good many of these institutional changes are in fact simply matters for HR. There is not a lot here that threatens the essential features of teaching or research as those have been practiced in the academy for the last 120 years. Wait a minute: There is NOTHING here that undermines those practices in ANY way! It is the quality of life and levels of equity associated with academic work that would start to change if such policies were to be established.

So, why then does this list seem like fantasy?

Because, I suspect, any one of these changes, let alone the whole collection, would likely seem to many in the university today primarily like a gender-based accommodation, a change to established institutional practice that derives from issues of practitioner identity. And American science is very, very reluctant to lend those issues any significant influence. We might feel bad about demographic imbalances in these professions, but we’re not going to let those “social” issues infiltrate our labs, classrooms, and other places where reputable, rigorous science is meant to be the order of the day.

That combination of impulses explains why the studies of race or gender inequity in STEM pile up, year after year, but the project of real inclusion in the academy just inches along. (And of course, STEM is not alone in its cultural aversion to thinking about identity; thanks to Perri Strawn for making the connection to a similar critical discussion regarding business, by Avivah Wittenberg-Cox.)

So here’s an idea: What if we get prominent universities to leverage their existing reputations for rigor in STEM and model these very doable gender-equity reforms? Our STEM disciplines are inherently aspirational, so it might only take one or two national or even regional leaders to make an impact in this way. MIT under its now-retiring president Susan Hockfield took a few such steps; why not more steps, taken more conspicuously, to set in motion a large-scale transformation?

A second piece just out in Science (and summarized by Robin Wilson in the Chronicle of Higher Education) reminds us just how badly such shifts are needed. Tracking careers of women in STEM fields, Deborah Kaminski and Cheryl Geisler find that the high attrition rate among women STEM faculty in US universities largely offsets recent documented improvements in retention and promotion. Under existing conditions and hiring patterns, they report, university science departments would require nearly a century to attain gender parity.

A century?? We’re talking epochal time scales here! Yet go back to Williams and Ceci: there is clearly no shortage of good, creative thinking on what to do to change academic working conditions... on doable steps that would cost STEM programs money, but not rigor.

And we can’t let money stop the conversation, as it so often does: universities spend plenty of it on labs and salaries when they think those costs are merited to keep up their reputations. And that’s the key here: Again, STEM disciplines are by nature aspirational, judging all departments and programs in comparison to Big Guns like MIT, Stanford, Chicago, Berkeley, or Michigan. If those leaders act, the much wider culture change may very well begin. Trend setters, step up: your to-do list is ready!

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