Just last month, researchers at Rice and Southern Methodist Universities released a study showing that female scientists were twice as likely as their male counterparts to regret not having more children. Further, these regrets were seen as prompting some female grad students and postdocs to consider leaving academic science.

On Monday, the National Science Foundation announced a series of new policies designed to make the agency's grant-making policies reflect support for those trying to balance parenthood with research careers. White House officials said that the goal of the effort was to promote change not only at the NSF, but throughout research universities, with the aim over 10 years of raising the percentage of tenure-track faculty in STEM fields who are women (about 28 percent) to their representation among new STEM Ph.D.s (about 40 percent).

John P. Holdren, director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, said at a news briefing that the policy changes will help both fathers and mothers, but that "it is much more common for women to give up STEM careers" than it is for men, and that the shifts are designed to prevent those departures.

Specifically, the NSF will:

- Allow postponement for one year of grants because of childbirth or adoption.
- Allow grant suspension for parental leave.
- Provide supplementary funds to cover the cost of hiring research technicians to maintain laboratories when grant recipients are on family leave.
- Permit those serving on peer review panels to meet with their colleagues virtually, rather than in person, to reduce child-care needs created by travel.
- Fund more research on the effectiveness of policies that are designed to keep women in the science pipeline.

At the same time, the White House announced a series of related efforts by non-governmental groups. The Association for Women in Science is starting a new campaign to bring representatives of government, industry and academe together to discuss ways that work places can promote training, re-entry and retraining of women for science jobs. The Association of American Universities and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities pledged to find ways to "promote more flexible work and learning environments for those in STEM and other disciplines."

Subra Suresh, director of the National Science Foundation, stressed that most of these efforts required policy changes, not new money. He said he hoped that these "seemingly simple" ideas would inspire universities to review their own policies and look for ways to assure "more flexible" career paths for academic scientists.

At the NSF, he said, many of the policies are based on the actions taken "in pockets of the foundation" that will now be official policy for the entire agency. The same expansion of good efforts is needed in universities, he said.

Elaine Ecklund, associate professor of sociology at Rice University, co-author of last month's study on science and parenthood, and author of several other studies of women and science, called Monday's announcement "huge news."

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Ecklund said that a university may have enlightened policies such as, for example, allowing new parents to stop the tenure clock following the arrival of a new child. But an NSF grant recipient might be reluctant to take advantage of that policy if it would endanger a grant that might be key to a tenure bid. "University policies are one thing, but there are all these other pieces of the job of a scientist that are not covered by university policies," she said.

The NSF has enough prestige, she said, that she hopes all other funders will follow its lead, and that universities without good policies would adopt them as well.

Ecklund said she was particularly impressed with the decision of the NSF to allow additional funds to be used to hire technicians to keep labs running during family leaves. In many fields of science, "you may want to stop the clock, but you may be in a phase of the research where you can't stop, so this would keep things going."

— Scott Jaschik

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