



**SLOAN WORK AND FAMILY
RESEARCH NETWORK**
BOSTON COLLEGE

February 2007 • Volume 9(2)

THE NETWORK NEWS
A WORK-FAMILY NEWS
PUBLICATION

Conversations with the Experts

Teaching Work and Family



Celina Pagani-Tousignant

Bio: Celina Pagani-Tousignant is the president and founder of Normisur International, an international management consulting firm that specializes in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Community Involvement, Work/Life (W/L), Diversity, and Executive Coaching. Having a strong global presence, her clientele includes customers in the U.S., Canada, Latin America and Asia. Celina's goal is to create social change by building bridges between companies, communities and people from diverse backgrounds and forging relationships across cultural chasms. Her services include: executive briefings, manager and employee training, project management, strategy development, organizational change management, large systems intervention, facilitation, curriculum development, organizational assessment and speaker engagements.

Born in Uruguay, South America, Celina is fluent in Spanish and French and has a working knowledge of Portuguese. She has an M.A. in Clinical Psychology, is a licensed Marriage, Family and Child Counselor and is author of *Breaking the Rules- Counseling Ethnic Minorities* as well as many articles on counseling, Diversity, and Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs).

Over the years, Celina has conducted hundreds of Diversity and Transition Management seminars for people working in organizations undergoing change. She has also provided executive coaching and guidance to numerous leaders on how to deal with their own personal transition during times of extreme change. She has trained over 3,500 individuals and is often sought after as a speaker on topics related to CSR, Community Involvement, W/L, Diversity and Cross-Cultural Communication.



Stephen Sweet

Bio: Stephen Sweet recently joined the sociology faculty at Ithaca College in New York. Prior to that he served as the associate director of the Cornell Careers Institute: A Sloan Center for the Study of Working Families. Dr. Sweet earned his doctorate in sociology in 1994 from the University of New Hampshire, where he studied the experiences of rural workers in a restructuring economy. His first appointment was at the State University of New York in Potsdam. His most recent books, *College and Society: An Introduction to the Sociological Imagination* (2001), and *Data Analysis with SPSS* (2003), demonstrates ways that sociological perspectives and methods can inform personal choices and social policy. Steve Sweet studies the resources available to working families and the strategies couples use to negotiate the often times competing demands of work and family. This research involves looking at the cultural context in which work-family relationships take place, the structures of workplace and family arrangements, and the ways in which people chart paths in what are sometimes very difficult situations. His goals are to find "what works," the strategies and resources that create satisfied individuals, happy couples, and good employees.

An Interview with Celina Pagnani-Tousignant and Stephen Sweet

By Judi Casey and Karen Corday

Casey: Why is it important to teach work-family studies to undergraduates?

Sweet: First of all, work and family studies are interesting in and of themselves. I teach at a liberal arts college, and part of what we do is help the students to understand intellectual connections—to link concepts and ideas in ways that are not immediately apparent. By the time they graduate, students should be fairly conversant in making those connections and thinking about these linkages.

A second concern is making sure that students are politically savvy. Students will have opportunities to support or resist different policy and political initiatives, and some actions will affect the speed with which these work-family concerns are addressed.

The third important dimension relates to their future roles as employees and employers. Most of the students at Ithaca College will be managers and professionals who are in positions with the power to affect organizational culture and policies. We want them to be receptive and proactive, and to make organizational changes that support work-family efforts.

One of the interesting aspects of teaching at the undergraduate level is that we're not teaching work-life practitioners or, for the most part, budding researchers. Most students will not get a Ph.D. focusing on work-family. However, I think building a sense of consciousness about work-family issues may affect who they support in elections, how they respond to employees, and how they construct their own lives.

Casey: Why is it important to offer work/life practitioners training about work/life programs and strategy?

Pagnani-Tousignant: In some companies, the work/life focus emerged informally, such as from a CEO who cared about his or her employees or from someone at the bottom of the organization who was interested in developing programs. These companies may have exciting programs in place, but the methodology that they are using could be improved. Also, the results of work/life programs may not be quantified, or HR may want to grow and expand their programs, but does not have the tools to conduct a solid assessment. Furthermore, the programs can't only benefit the employees; there must be a value added to the company. Training classes provide frameworks so work/life practitioners can identify the steps needed to implement an effective strategy. The classes also allow participants to share ideas with each other; they can discuss openly any problems and challenges they have with like-minded colleagues.

Another component important to the success of work/life programs involves changing the company's culture. This can be the most difficult task to accomplish. CEOs and other decision-makers are always going to ask "What value do these programs add to the company?" People can see the value added to the community and to employees, but workplace practitioners must be able to articulate added value in a way that is clear to the decision makers. They must be able to work with the entire organization systematically, not just their own units. Classes can help people learn how to take a systematic approach.

Casey: What's the focus when you teach a class on work-family studies? What key concepts do you teach to undergraduates?

Sweet: One of the books that I use is *The Work and Family Handbook*, which I edited with Ellen Ernst Kossek and Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes. I discuss the history of work and family as an area of scholarship, a history of connections and the ways in which work and family concerns today are the same and different than they were in the past. I examine policy intersections, which includes programs such as FMLA, TANF and work hour legislation. I make international comparisons and give some historical perspective.

Students must come away from the course with an understanding of diversity in terms of workers and work arrangements as well as families. When we talk about work and family, which workers are we talking about? Which jobs? Which families?

I also discuss opportunity divides and stresses. An opportunity divide might be the existence of a dual labor market and the types of opportunities available to people at the lower end of the economy opposed to those with professional jobs. There are some similarities, but there are also many differences. Other divides include

gender, race, age and life stage.

I teach students about the concerns of different interest groups. One aspect of work-family I learned about while working on the Handbook is to consider the business case. We want to humanize workplaces and implement work/life programs in the interest of the workers, but there are businesses that must be run. How do you convince decision makers that it's in the company's interest to change work policy? On the other hand, I believe that in some circumstances the business case for work-family policies cannot be made. I teach my students this concept; there are times that policies must be implemented that can run counter to certain constituencies' interests.

Finally, I focus on issues of methodologies: How do we understand "work" and "family" and how do we describe the connections between the two?

Casey: What key concepts do you focus on when teaching work and family to work/life practitioners?

Pagani-Tousignant: I first started teaching at the Boston College Center for Work & Family in 1999. The average practitioner who had a few years of work experience did not easily make the jump from programs to strategy. That was the first topic on which I focused, and I still think that's a good place to begin. Now, in 2007, there's a new generation of workers who are in their early twenties. These workers seem to make this jump more easily than people did in the past.

Most importantly, practitioners need to sell the idea that work-life strategy will support both employees and businesses. To do this, they must identify a pain within their organization and be savvy enough to quantify what will happen if the pain is ignored. Many practitioners are reactive in their day to day lives. Strategizing must be proactive; people need time to plan, gather data from the entire company, analyze the data, and prioritize. Many people are not familiar with quantifying; they see the numbers and they get scared. This is such an important skill to master; companies quantify everything, so why shouldn't we detail the benefits of work-life programs? Once work-life practitioners identify their initiatives, they must present their ideas and articulate the business benefits.

I also teach about successful program implementation. There are stages to implementation, and the communication stage is often ignored.

Casey: Are there any specific content areas on which you focus?

Pagani-Tousignant: Yes. World at Work is now running the Work-Life Certificate program. They have identified eight topic areas for courses. Three topics are available right now: Introduction to Work-Life Effectiveness, Health and Wellness Programs and the Flexible Workplace. In February, we'll start the Organizational Culture Change class. I'm not sure if other organizations are providing classes elsewhere in the country. I haven't heard about other topics being taught on a national level. Some vendors do provide training for their clients.

Casey: Are work-family courses offered in most colleges and universities?

Sweet: Marcie Pitt-Catsoupes, my student Joshua Mumm and I recently presented our findings from a content analysis of course catalogues of fifty colleges and universities in the United States. One of our key findings was that only one in five colleges and universities offered a course in work and family. It is comparatively rare to find courses specifically devoted to the subject of work and family. However, if we look at the course descriptions for courses that broach work and family concerns, student exposure to this content is more evident. Eighty percent of the college catalogs have courses with work and family as a major component of a course. These include courses such as Sociology of Work, Sociology of Family, Families and Society and Gender and Society. I'm sure this underestimates the amount of work and family content taught in college classrooms. Then again, recognizing that work and family as a discrete course is not common should be a concern of the work-family community.

Casey: Which departments offer these work and family courses?

Sweet: When they are available, they are almost always sociology courses. This is interesting, because psychology is producing the most research on work and family right now, but sociology is obviously leading the way in terms of teaching undergraduates.

Casey: Are the courses with some work-family content also primarily in the sociology department?

Sweet: Again, primarily sociology, but you see a good representation from other disciplines, including human development, family studies, women's studies, and psychology.

Casey: Not so much economics, anthropology or business.

Sweet: Out of the fifty colleges and universities, we only found one specific work-family course taught in an economics or business department, and to my eye, this is something that the work-family community needs to consider.

Casey: What are some of the challenges in providing training to practitioners who are working in different business units (EAP, Wellness, Diversity, Training, Corporate Social Responsibility, HR, and Benefits)?

Pagani-Tousignant: The challenge is not so much to train them in the classroom, but for the practitioner to go back to work and create alliances within their organization. People tend to be isolated in their workplaces. Now that I'm teaching at World at Work, I'm getting a lot of people from Benefits in my classes. This is a relatively new development; I haven't taught them in the past. People who work in Benefits tend to be very concrete thinkers; they work within a specific structure and therefore do not tend to think in terms of a "big picture." Benefits people love the Health and Wellness class, because it focuses in part on cost reduction to the company, a very concrete measure. I start there, and then go on to provide that "big picture" view.

Casey: So it's not so much the content area or business unit that presents the challenge, but getting people to see outside of their particular, possibly isolated focuses, whatever that may be?

Pagani-Tousignant: Yes. When I think about my own professional life, this is exactly what happened to me. When I started out, I was good at the small picture. I could run a few tight little programs. However, I had to learn to think bigger and influence the entire company. I had to understand how companies make and use money. I had to be able to articulate how I could help them to achieve their goals, so they would understand what I do and value my work.

Casey: What are some of the challenges in teaching a subject that is interdisciplinary?

Sweet: It's challenging, but it's also liberating. One of the positive aspects is that it allows one to stretch the range of topics covered within the classroom. But one concern I believe we need to consider is that the interdisciplinary nature of work-family studies presents challenges in terms of programming. Colleges are built with walls and divisions—we have psychology departments, sociology departments and so forth. The big challenge is getting work-family solidly situated within college programs, and without clear ownership, there's a danger of marginalization. Colleges and universities need to commit to work-family programs without losing the important interdisciplinary nature. This presents a challenge.

Casey: How do they do that?

Sweet: One approach to increasing work and family's centrality is to build interdisciplinary centers. The centers will place as top priority the involvement of undergraduates in understanding, researching, and broadcasting the institutional connections of work, family, and their linkages to communities. The Berger Institute for Work, Family, and Children at Claremont McKenna College offers a wonderful example of this type of institution. These centers could be very attractive at teaching oriented institutions, as they can provide services to the local communities and provide opportunities for truly unique educational experiences. While they will contribute to traditional scholarship, I believe the biggest contribution of these centers would be to increase the visibility, and centrality, of work-family in the curriculum. This, in turn, will influence recruitment into different departments, support for student work, etc.

Casey: What does this mean for students who would graduate from a college with such a center?

Sweet: Part of the benefit is getting students actively engaged in the study of the wide-ranging issues of concern. Today, much education remains passive. The vision that I have would be for centers to engage students by having them contribute to and perform actual research that is relevant to the concerns of working families and businesses. Students would learn what questions are important, gather pertinent information, analyze it, and hopefully apply it to the real world experiences of today's working families. This way, the students are not passively learning; they are actively engaged in the topics and constructing products that may

actually make a difference.

Casey: What skills do you anticipate work/life practitioners will learn from the classes that you teach?

Pagani-Tousignant: They must become change agents, so this role guarantees that they will encounter resistance. If practitioners are not prepared for this push back, they are going to have a hard time. They must understand that organizational change does not happen overnight; it can take years. There are small gains that lead to big gains. Practitioners need flexibility, strength of character, and personal toughness. They must be driven by a passion or vision; they must understand that if people are well taken care of, they will work better, and they must be able to persuasively communicate this to the people in charge.

Casey: So the most important skills are not related to specific topics or business units. Rather, the skills one needs to be an effective change agent are applicable no matter what their content area.

Pagani-Tousignant: That's right. Information on programs and policy, such as dependent care, is available everywhere. Memorizing this information is not the key to success in this field.

Another essential skill is building those internal alliances that I mentioned before. People often have their own "turf" that they don't want to share, which can be a huge problem. Change agents can't work alone; if you create alliances with other departments, everyone gets more done. Once again, you need to sell your ideas and show these other departments how they benefit from partnering with you.

Casey: So it's necessary to not only create these alliances but also always seek out new partnerships as well?

Pagani-Tousignant: Exactly. The needs of employees are constantly shifting and changing. Always looking for new partnerships allows us to support employees effectively.

Casey: It's an important point to remember that work and family is not a static field. It's constantly changing and evolving; what work/life meant in 1999 is different from what it means in 2007.

Pagani-Tousignant: Yes. Issues like globalization create sameness as well as difference. At the recent Roundtable Summit in London, I was impressed to find that issues in Australia were similar to those in Singapore, Europe and the United States. There were differences as well. For instance, the attitude of new workforce participants is that they want mentors who are at the very top of the company and lots of autonomy and freedom right away. If they don't get what they want, they are gone within a year or two. This is happening in Europe, the United States and Australia. The issue of the maturing workforce is an issue in the U.K. and the United States, but not Mexico. Mexico has a huge number of young people, so many of them migrate to other countries.

Casey: Are there any skills that undergraduates learn in a work-family course?

Sweet: One challenge for undergraduates is that most of them lack real life experience in holding a full-time job or caring for children or elderly parents, at least at a traditional age college such as those who attend Ithaca College. When you discuss the challenge of balancing work and home, they say, "I'll make it work! I can do it!" Structuring assignments that accurately portray these strains takes creativity. One thing I do is ask students to create a family budget based on the minimum wage. Students can then see that it's almost impossible to make ends meet; it's not just a matter of applying oneself and trying hard. I have a similar type of assignment with work hour arrangements.

The skills they will develop from taking my courses are the core concepts of sociology: understanding roles, templates and structures. They should also understand the rudiments of performing research and know how to apply particular methodologies. Critical thinking skills are key, as is challenging assumptions and taking assumptions to their logical conclusion. When courses are taught well, they help students develop literacies—cultural literacies as well as quantitative literacies. These are very transferable skills.

Casey: How does this differ for graduate students?

Sweet: The big difference is that graduate students who are taking a work-family courses are likely to already have an interest in the subject. They can see connections to their future vocations. They are aware of some of the literature about the sociology of work as well as the sociology of family, and can recognize some connections. Undergraduates are learning work, family, and work-family simultaneously.

Casey: What could academics and workplace practitioners learn from one another?

Sweet: One of the topics I know little about is what it's like to implement workplace policies and the ramifications within the workplace. What sorts of impact do policies have on workplace operations, who requests what and how, and so forth. I'd like to learn more about this, and I'd like to increase the number of business students I attract to my classes.

Pagani-Tousignant: Many undergraduate students are not sure what they want to do with their lives in terms of a job; they are exploring many areas and many options. Maybe professors who teach work/life can help channel students who are interested in this type of work to find their passion and learn about the work/life field. It makes such a difference if you find your passion early in life; working in a field or at a job you don't like is a terrible experience. The role of professors is to help their students find that passion; it's then our job to toughen them up so they can be change agents! Even if the students do not go into work/life directly, they have been exposed to the ideas and importance of the field. They will then be open to working with work/life practitioners in whatever fields they choose.

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Frequencies of Work-Family Content in Course Curricula and College Programs

Methodology

Content analysis of college catalogues

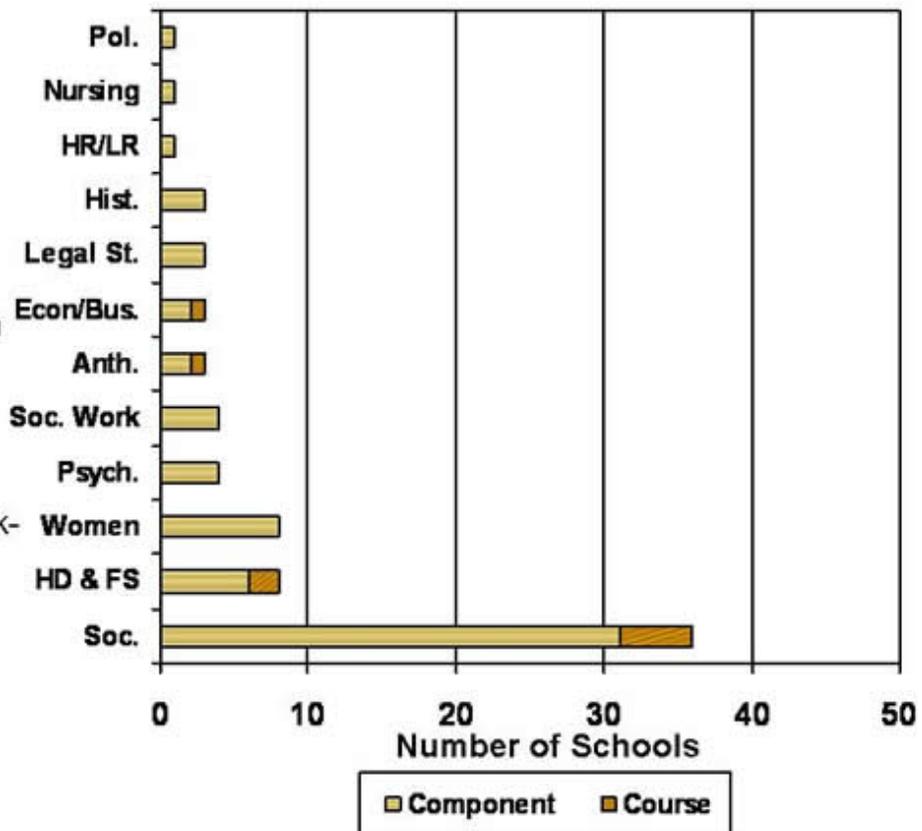
Sample:

Random sample of 50 Carnegie Colleges & Universities with a high enrollment of undergrads

Measures:

Course - A formal Work-Family course

Component - Work-Family topics embedded within a course description



Source: Sweet, S., Pitt-Catsoupes, M., & Mumm, J. (2006) "Workshop on Teaching Work and Family." American Sociological Association Annual Meetings, Montreal, Canada, August 12, 2006. Research supported by a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

**Additional Resources Related to Teaching Work and Family,
as recommended by Celina Pagani-Tousignant**

Corporate Voices for Working Families: "Corporate Voices For Working Families is a non-partisan, non-profit corporate membership organization created to bring the private sector voice into the public dialogue on issues affecting working families. Collectively our 53 partner companies employ more than 4 million individuals throughout all fifty states, with annual net revenues of \$1 trillion. Over 70% of our partner companies are listed in the Fortune 500, and all share leadership positions in developing family support policies for their own workforces. This experience is the primary asset Corporate Voices brings to the ongoing dialogue with policy makers and other stakeholders."

- To access the site, click here: <http://www.cvworkingfamilies.org>.

The Great Place to Work Institute, Inc.: "The Great Place to Work Institute, Inc. is a research and management consultancy based in the U.S. with International Affiliate offices throughout the world. [W]e have been listening to employees and evaluating employers since 1980, to understand what makes a workplace great. We know that the foundation of every great workplace is trust between employees and management. Our ongoing research, measurement tools, and educational services have made us leaders in helping build high-trust workplaces."

- To access the site, click here: <http://www.greatplacetowork.com>.

Families and Work Institute: "Families and Work Institute is a nonprofit center dedicated to providing research for living in today's changing workplace, changing family and changing community. Since the institute was founded in 1989, our work has tackled issues in four major areas: the workforce and workplace; education, care and community; parenting; and youth development. Families and Work Institute's research takes on emerging issues before they crest and includes some of the most comprehensive research on the U.S. workforce available. The Institute's work has helped change the language of debates to move the discussion forward toward more effective, and data-driven solutions, and to result in action."

- To access the site, click here: <http://www.familiesandwork.org>.

Labor Project for Working Families: "The Labor Project for Working Families is a national, nonprofit advocacy and policy organization providing technical assistance, resources, and education to unions and union members on family issues in the workplace including: childcare, elder care, family leave, work hours, and quality of life."

- To access the site, click here: <http://www.laborproject.org/index.html>.

WFC Resources: "Since 1984, WFC Resources (formerly Work & Family Connection) has been working to help employers create a workplace that is both supportive and effective, a workplace that ensures that your investment in employees pays off, a work environment with a dual agenda – one that meets business goals and also allows employees to meet their personal goals."

- To access the site, click here: <http://www.wfcresources.com>.

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network appreciates the extensive support we have received from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the Boston College community.

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The Sloan Work and Family Research Network is funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation