

The Value of Our Work

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

I work. I earn money for my household. Money is only one of the reasons I work. I also work because it's fulfilling and having a career gives me a sense of stability. I have goals and enjoy achieving them.

Money remains one of the main reasons I work. And I have small children. Having small children when both you and your co-parent (if you have one) work requires paying for child care.

If you are a working parent and the primary caregiver (a role that not always but usually falls to women), then you have likely had the experience of comparing your income to the amount you spend on child care. I have. And perhaps you've wondered what I have wondered: Given how much I spend on child care, is it worth it to work at all?

Emergencies Arise

Last school year, the water service in our midsized town shut down through a series of unfortunate events. Between a blown water main and a contamination at the main treatment facility, our entire city's water supply was cut off suddenly. There was no water for drinking, bathing or even flushing the toilets. Around 10 o'clock in the morning, when the local emergency announcement system let us know about the water emergency, other announcements from the public schools started pinging cell phones. Our kids were coming home, and they weren't going back to school until the water supply could be fixed.

I left my work meeting, dashed home and prepared to meet my elementary-aged children as they came home from school.

I gathered emergency supplies: My family had water jugs on hand because we live in the Southeast—the land of hurricanes—and we tend to be prepared. I was facing days without school.

I was also facing days when I wouldn't be able to work. That day, the kids and I made the best of things until my husband came home. At that point, I headed into my home office to get some work done while he handled dinner and put the kids to bed.

Later that evening, in private, I tried to explain to him my worries—which were so much larger than the current emergency. Work would be set aside. Again. Frustrated, I said, "How am I supposed to work, to forward my career, to earn money? How am I supposed to do anything when my work can be pushed aside without warning?"

How many times per month do I set aside my work because emergencies arise?

If you are the primary parent in your household and you teach at a university, have you ever rescheduled class because your child spiked a fever in school? Have you ever paid a student to watch your child with an ear infection in your office while you taught your courses? If you are a

higher ed worker with fixed hours, have you ever wondered whether paying for day care for two children—a cost that can be comparable to your own salary—is worth it?

Talking with my husband, and facing an unexpected workweek with no child care, I started to cry. He picked up the phone to call a babysitter for the next day, something I hadn't thought to do.

I said, "We can't afford to pay a sitter to watch our kids all day. That's out of our budget." I said it would be better for me to take time off of work, a better financial decision.

We could afford it, he insisted, so we must. He made the call. At the end of the next day, after the sitter left, everyone felt great: He and I both had solid workdays, the kids had a great time with the sitter and the money for the sitter seemed worth it in the end.

But I would have never called her. What could my husband see that I couldn't?

A Comparison Made

He saw a truth that many working mothers struggle to see. I valued my work incorrectly.

When I refused to call a sitter, I compared the dollars I would earn the next day—the particular monetary value of my work—to the dollars we would spend on a sitter. How much would I bill on that particular Wednesday?

How would that amount compare to the amount I would pay our sitter?

The truth is that the value of our work can't be measured *only* in dollars. There is value in our work beyond the monetary value of our paychecks. If our work brings us joy and fulfillment, then that is worth something more than the dollars it brings. Furthermore, as *Working Mother* magazine has pointed out, "Professions like academia and law value the consistency of 'staying on track'"—another reason to maintain our professional lives.

Even as I write words about the value I place on my work, I feel the compulsion to say I love my children. Of course I love my children. Why must every working woman—who frets about contaminated water destroying her work week, or an ice storm, or norovirus—say she loves her children as though her love is in doubt? Can't love exist alongside a desire to be successful and fulfilled?

In fact, my husband was able to see something else that day: My desire to be successful and fulfilled is a manifestation of my love for my children. My joy, and my financial stability, ensures that their home is happy and stable. When I'm professionally fulfilled, I'm a better parent.

If I sit down and count out the dollars I earn and compare those dollars to the dollars we pay our emergency babysitter, then the money will rarely work out in my favor. But it won't be long before my kids won't need a babysitter.

Right now, even as I write this article, I'm at a conference where I'm a paid speaker. My family had a last-minute conflict, and we had to hire an emergency sitter for

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clear separation.”

In her limited free time, Richardson likes to stay at home with her husband and two cats to cook, read mysteries and do puzzles. She also enjoys time at theme parks, where she’s an avid roller-coaster rider.

Although she never played piano professionally at Carnegie Hall, Richardson has more than surpassed her mother’s expectations. “Her dream as a Korean immigrant was to have her children attend an Ivy League college,” she says.

Done and done. 

Campus Culture and Sexual Violence

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helps cohort members connect at NASPA conferences.

Smaller Pieces

While campus leaders will argue that something must be done to stem the tide of sexual violence on campus, too often the problem seems overwhelming. “In our experience, this is where the collective has been helpful in breaking down the items into smaller pieces,” she says.

Schools who want to tackle the problem on their own are encouraged to do so. “They will tell us ‘We want to build something specific to our institution,’” says Tombros Korman.

Since the ultimate goal is to eradicate all types of sexual violence, she welcomes any efforts to accomplish that. “We are trying to make this as easy and doable as possible,” she says.

By using the initiative, schools can take steps to create a culture that addresses the actual root causes of sexual violence. 

PROFILE: Fulfilling the Promise

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Watson also has an eye toward building diversity in the academy. She’s mentoring women of color—both at CCNY and on the national scene—including doctoral students at Howard University DC and at Michigan State University as a Barbara L. Jackson Scholars faculty mentor. The University Council for Educational Administration Jackson Scholars Network develops future faculty of color with high promise and ability for the field of educational leadership and policy.

“I was mentored, and I understand what it meant to me to be a Barbara Jackson scholar,” she says. “The support I received from black women in the academy has been life-changing. It’s been really affirming to have women who have gone through it and gotten to the other side reach back. Now I’ve joined them. I too reach back, and that’s been really beautiful.” 

In Her Own Words: Modeling How to Be a Campus Leader as a Mother

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safer. It feels familiar. It feels like the advice you follow when you want to be taken seriously in academia.

But then I’ve missed another moment, even if it is small, to be transparent and to create space for other mothers to imagine a version of higher education leadership that

looks like them. I send the first version of the email and enjoy (really!) hearing unsolicited advice about how to chaperone and funny stories of field trip disasters from people on my staff.

I won’t always get the balance right. One night as I was leaving the office, I absentmindedly told a fellow VP that I needed to “go potty” before getting in the car, which is probably more of a glimpse into my mothering side than he really needed to hear. But I’m going to continue to err on the side of being a whole person at work and hope that the way that I perform motherhood and leadership might be a counter-narrative to the next women leaders for my college who’ve read all the same research I have. 

Dr. Wendy Robinson is a mother of two and the vice president of student affairs at Inver Hills Community College and can be found on Twitter: @HigherEdWendy.

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one of the days I’m gone because my husband also had to work. The cost of the sitter was nearly half of my speaking fee. I felt guilty, gutted even—what was the point of me going if all of my money was going to pay a sitter?

And so I sat down and answered the question honestly: The point of me going isn’t only the money. The point is to meet people. To share ideas and learn new ones. To advance my career. These things have value, and I wasn’t taking them into account.

We, and our work, are worth more than the dollars we bring in. Our value can’t be measured on a spreadsheet, and we shouldn’t try to do so. In a world that deeply undervalues the work we do, both at home and in the workplace, we need to learn how to value ourselves. 

INTERVIEW: Enter the Hivemind: An Interview With Sarah Rose Cavanagh

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underlying values,” she says.

That said, Cavanagh acknowledges that these conversations aren’t easy, and that there are no pat answers. She further recognizes the tension women face in protecting our energy while staying open to diverse ideas and listening to people with different opinions. “We need to listen to people we disagree with, but it’s a complicated dance,” she says.

Writing Advice

With two books to her name, Dr. Cavanagh shared some writing advice with *WIHE* readers who might be considering publishing their ideas.

“Start with essays,” she says. “Focus on your pet peeves. A lot of my essays started with those. You might just turn your pet peeve essay into a book project.”

She adds that criticism and pushback aren’t signs you’re on the wrong path, but rather, opportunities to further hone your ideas. She says, “Start small, and remember that there’s nothing like some good, critical feedback.”

WIHE readers might consider how entering the hivemind can inspire them to build prosocial habits and support networks, to moderate their screen time and to rethink how they engage with diverse ideas. 