

ADVICE

It's Illegal, Yet It Happens All the Time

How pregnant women and mothers get hounded out of higher education



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Why don't we have more women in STEM fields? One reason is that students get hounded out of their college or graduate-school programs when they become pregnant. It's against federal law,

but it happens all the time.

One student told us she had a pregnancy-related disability that required her to go to the hospital at least twice a week. Exhausted but driven, she continued to produce quality work. Late in her pregnancy, the publishing deadline she was struggling to meet was accelerated by her department — it now fell right after her due date. Just months prior she had been celebrated as a rising star in her department, but now, she said, "I had to prove I was still worthy to even be in their program." If she didn't meet the new deadline, she would lose the funding her family relied upon. After her baby was born, she was intimidated into finishing her degree in significantly less time than the average student in

her department. The hostility and bias the student faced "traumatized me in so many ways," she said. "I wasn't asking for accommodations, I wanted to be treated like everybody else, but I was the one who was punished."

A graduate student with a disability caused by childbirth was pursuing her degree full force after a lengthy struggle, only to be told by a faculty mentor, "You don't have a disability, you just need to go home and be with your baby." Professors frequently make off-the-cuff statements — often written off as harmless — telling pregnant women or new mothers to stay home instead of pursuing their education. Plaintiffs' lawyers love such direct evidence of gender discrimination.

And it's not just professors who open their institutions to legal liability. Administrators do, too. A graduate student said she anticipated the birth of her child at the start of the academic year, so she asked to be able to record classes for the first week or two of the semester. The student-affairs dean told the student to withdraw for at least a semester, with no guarantee of readmission, informing her that all of the pregnant students at the institution in the past six years withdrew from the program — except one, who regretted her decision. This student, like many others, didn't want to take leave at all.

The consequences of being forced out of your program can be grim. Many women need to keep working in their university-sponsored jobs to make ends meet. Yet those jobs are often unavailable to students while they are on leave, or aren't offered back to them upon their return. On many campuses, being on leave or withdrawn status means losing that income, along with health insurance, loan deferment status, and even your university email address. Sometimes it means losing your housing, too.