


Chapter 11

Motherscholar and MotherLeader: No Thanks, for Now

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ABSTRACT

The author recently had the opportunity to apply for an administrative promotion. Despite thinking the author had long wanted this position, the author decided not to apply. Unfortunately, the author's experience mirrored a very typical pattern in colleges and universities. Academia has a long history of academic women being kept from or deciding not to ascend the ranks of leadership. In this chapter, the author explores why the author made the surprising decision not to apply for a promotion, as well as the reasons why other MotherLeaders choose to pause or stop on the upward journey in administration in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Last summer, I had an opportunity to apply for an Associate Dean position at my university. It was a position I had long wanted, or at least thought I did. My long-time area of research is on women in leadership in higher education, birthed from my own aspirations of being in and rising through leadership. I've also participated in leadership workshops and professional development, both on campus and in intensive, off campus, multi-day (and multi-thousand dollar) formats. I've engaged in online and on-site conferences to hone my leadership skills, and I've learned as I went, being Coordinator, Co-Chair, and Chair of the largest department in our

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institution. As a 17-year Department Chair veteran, I truly thought I was ready for and wanted a new challenge. I am indeed ready for it, but apparently, when it came to it, I didn't want it. At least not right now.

Oddly, I just couldn't bring myself to apply for the position. I had a negative physical reaction every time I considered it. On the face of it, I could say that being a motherscholar was my priority. I didn't want anything to interfere with my participation in my son's senior year of high school. I know that's not true though. I have an excellent relationship with my Dean and I have long known that she is a "family first" type of leader, so spending time with my son wouldn't have been an issue. I also realized that I had spent my entire adult life, save for a few years in my early 20's, avoiding the typical 9-to-5 workday. A wonderful bonus that came with becoming a professor was that, for the most part, I could make my own hours as long as I got my work done. Being exceedingly independent and self-motivated, I knew that kind of accountability was for me. The idea of being held to a schedule (more or less) in the interest of a promotion just didn't feel right to me. Being locked into regular hours felt like a step down the ladder rather than up. This reason for not seeking promotion I know to be true, and certainly factored into my decision not to apply for Associate Dean, but that couldn't have been the whole of it. Declining something I thought I had wanted for a very long time, for something that feels a bit like a cheap reason, just doesn't make sense to me. There had to be more, but what was it?

As a MotherLeader, I have struggled since to determine what made me avoid my chance for promotion. I truly still have not figured it out, but I know it was the right thing. I know it in my bones. But then *why* did I do that? I may never know, but I certainly hope I do. It will help to guide me through the twilight years of my career. A thought that makes me a bit melancholy, but mostly, it feels right. Retirement will be the prize at the end of a long and productive career. It will soon be time, and I'm ready. But first, I think there's a little bit more to do.

BACKGROUND

Motherscholars

The concept of "motherscholar" was first developed by Cheryl Mattias (Mattias, 2011; Mattias, 2022; Mattias & Nishi, 2018). Motherscholars are individuals who live the intersected, interwoven, lives of mothers and academic professionals in higher education. "DocMamas" (CohenMiller, 2018), hold similar roles to motherscholars, except they are engaging in doctoral studies, rather than working as professors. Mattias (2011) posits that while typically women keep each role in their

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