

The Family Profession

Cruz Medina

In a photo taken at the community college where my father Julian Medina taught, he's wearing a tie and a middle-management, short-sleeved button-up shirt, shaking hands with farm worker advocate César Chávez. As in my father's proud image, I too work hard to project a professional appearance, often wearing a tie the first few weeks of the semester. I do so because of the often mistaken assumptions students make about my knowledge and the wis-



César Chávez, left, and the author's father, Julian Medina, right.

dom of assigning readings by writers of color. Unfortunately, this feeling of insecurity comes from lived experience. When my Anglo mother married my Mexican American father, her father disowned her. Even though my father had earned his bachelor's degree and his master's degree and taught English at a community college in central California, his accomplishments did little to diminish my grandfather's racial prejudice. Before my father died in 2006 at the age of fifty-six, he often told me that I was supposed to surpass his success in the same way as he did with his accomplishment as the first in his family to graduate from college. He did this by changing the family trade of mowing

lawns to instead teaching English at the college level.

Welcoming my son William Julian Medina to the world on the first day of the fall 2011 semester, I more clearly recognize how parenthood—and parental leave—better illuminate the value of professionalism. As a new parent, I have learned that performing as a graduate student and as a parent requires steady nerves. Fewer than twenty-four hours after my wife gave birth to our son, I embraced a professional demeanor as I headed to my first class of first-year composition for the semester. As I held up my hand, pointing to the syllabus projected on the board, the security bracelet issued by the hospital still dangled from my wrist. Fortunately, my institution has an extremely supportive writing program, and I qualified for parental leave—even as a graduate student.

As my wife's maternity leave ended, I contacted the instructor substituting for me. Going in, I knew my creative writing colleague liked to define himself by rejecting "rhet/comp stuff" like reading and discussing pedagogical issues. Still, we coordinated assignments for the semester, and he agreed to transition into my class on my last day to make the students and myself more comfortable. Collaborating on the syllabus, I recognized how my son expanded the limits of my pedagogical comfort zone. As I read about the importance of transitioning with small children to reinforce their feelings of security, I better understood why our students in their first semester could benefit from a similar sense of security as they build their confidence when asked to compose academic discourse.

Still acclimating to parental leave, I exchanged emails with CCCC 2011 Exemplar Award-winner Ed White about the birth of my son and his absence at our department's welcome get-together. He congratulated me and spoke proudly of his granddaughter in rhetoric and composition studies going on the job market, before asking what else I had been up to. The combination of Ed's question and my adjustment to being primary caregiver caused me to feel caught in a double-bind: I felt guilty for working while someone else watched my son, and I experienced a professional guilt for not researching, writing, and serving on enough committees while I cared for him. Yet because graduate school professionalization emphasizes productivity while also writing, teaching, and serving on various committees, during those first few weeks of parental leave, I felt somewhat rudderless, no longer defined by my professional persona.

When I returned to the classroom, I felt like an absent parent trying to win my children's love. Unfortunately, even if I wanted to be the "fun weekend parent," I discovered the equivalent of kids eating candy corn for breakfast and brushing their teeth with fruit punch—by finding some students sitting with

their feet on desks with others peering at cell phones. My colleague didn't tell them I was returning, having also discontinued using the class's online discussion board where students respond to readings with quotations and citations that often end up in their drafts. Not using the university's required textbook, my colleague also de-emphasized critical analysis of issues like race, class, and gender in readings by writers of color. In addition, the majority of students also arrived at class without drafts during a peer-editing session, since accountability was no longer a part of the class's culture. To top things off, in the students' end-of-semester reflections, they commented that the substitute valued their "opinions" more, as demonstrated by my colleague's uncritical, music critic writing assignment. While the students might have enjoyed ignoring academic discourse, I viewed the situation much as a new parent might by understanding the importance of modeling behavior and of provoking discussions of instances of social (in)justice that will stay with students far beyond our semester-long interaction.

When I was twelve my brother and I transferred to a new school district in order to avoid attending the local middle school where kids got beaten up for wearing shoelaces of the wrong color. My father dropped us off in the early morning and picked us up in the afternoon, which modeled the sustained effort required for both parenting and teaching. I often wish my father were still alive so I could ask him about teaching, writing, and being a father, although my research and writing about Chicano culture and rhetoric always work to keep him in mind. His memory also endures in my son's name and their shared birthday on August 22, singularly providing my family an opportunity to celebrate both of their lives. Every now and then, my father appears to me in dreams, sometimes at a distance and other times in close dialogue, though never long enough to ask him what I would in waking life. Without a doubt, my scholarship and profession now influence my role as father, revealing more about myself than ever before through writing, research, and, most importantly, teaching.

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