

UNIVERSITY AIMS TO SUPPORT ALL FEMALE GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH NEW CHILDBIRTH POLICY

by Michael Peña

The university has adopted a childbirth policy for female graduate students to accommodate the demands of late-stage pregnancy, childbirth and the care of a newborn. The new policy will allow the new mother to maintain full-time, registered student status, as well as facilitate her return to full participation in class work and, where applicable, research, teaching and clinical training in a seamless manner.

The childbirth policy, effective immediately, was announced by Gail Mahood, a professor of geological and environmental sciences and associate dean for graduate policy, during a regular meeting of the Faculty Senate on Thursday, Jan. 26. Stanford is only the second major U.S. university to offer such a policy, according to Geraldine L. Richmond, chair of the Committee on the Advancement of Women Chemists and a professor at the University of Oregon. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology introduced its "childbirth accommodation policy" in 2004.

One of Stanford's top priorities is to increase the number of women pursuing advanced degrees that will prepare them for leadership positions in academia, industry and government. And, as stated in the Stanford Graduate Student Handbook, "it is important to acknowledge that a woman's prime childbearing years are the same years she is likely to be in graduate school, doing postdoctoral training, and establishing herself in a career."

"So our main goal in designing this policy was to make sure that we retain in the academic pipeline women graduate students who become pregnant and give birth," Mahood said on Thursday.

The Childbirth Policy has four components. All female graduate students—including those in the professional schools—who are pregnant or have recently given birth and who are registered and matriculated: are eligible for an "academic accommodation period" of up to two academic quarters before and after the birth, during which the student may postpone course assignments, examinations and other academic requirements; and are eligible for full-time enrollment during this period and will retain access to

Stanford facilities, Cardinal Care student health insurance and Stanford housing.

Students also will be granted an automatic one-quarter extension of university and departmental requirements and academic milestones—with the possibility of up to three quarters by petition under unusual circumstances. (A Ph.D. qualifying exam is an example of an academic milestone.)

In addition, female graduate students supported by fellowships, teaching assistantships, and/or research assistantships will be excused from their regular teaching or research duties for a period of six weeks during which they will continue to receive support.

(Students will not receive a stipend or salary if none was received previously but are eligible for the academic accommodation period and the one-quarter extension of academic milestones.)

The policy also allows eligible students to avoid interruptions to on-campus housing, eligibility for student loans and deferment of student-loan repayment, Mahood said. For international students, the provision allowing a new mother to maintain full-time status will ensure that the status of her visa is unaffected, Mahood added. "I want to emphasize that this academic-accommodation period is not a leave of absence. We are expecting that the woman, to the extent that her health and the health of the infant will allow, will be in residence and will participate in course work and research—even if it is at a somewhat lower level than prior to the birth," Mahood said.

The new policy sets a minimum standard for accommodating female graduate students who give birth, Mahood said. It is expected that advisers, academic staff and department leaders "will work with sensitivity and imagination to provide more than this minimum, as some parts of the university are already doing," she added.

Last fall, the Chemistry Department unveiled a maternity policy for graduate students that would allow pregnant

women or new mothers to scale back their course work or research for up to 12 weeks and still be paid. Instituted by department Chair Richard Zare, the policy-along with Stanford's-are among the most generous in the country. "There's nothing in this policy that replaces the communication and cooperation between student and adviser and the good-faith efforts of both of them to accommodate the birth of a child," Mahood said. "And it's our intention, in establishing this policy, to reinforce the importance of that cooperation and to have the university

provide the support that makes that accommodation possible."

Adoption, foster-care placement, and paternity leave are covered under existing policies in the graduate student handbook that govern medical, maternity and paternity leave. The handbook also states that birth mothers may opt to use medical and maternity leaves in addition to or instead of the benefits provided by the new childbirth policy.

The policy will be administered by the Office of the Dean of Research through a petition process. For the policy's full text, please visit <http://gsh.stanford.edu/childbirth.html>.