Student debt has reached almost stratospheric heights. A Harvard Institute of Politics study found that 42 percent of all American adults under 30 have student debt.

According to the Project on Student Debt, the Class of 2015 graduated with an average debt of $30,100, leading them to postpone marriage, child rearing and home purchases. Rising costs have captured the attention of various constituencies, including academics such as Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab.

A professor of higher education policy and sociology at Temple University in Pennsylvania, Goldrick-Rab aims to research ways on how to make higher education more accessible and affordable. Previously a tenured professor in educational policy studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Goldrick-Rab moved back to the East Coast after her Twitter responses to Wisconsin political decisions garnered her hate responses and death threats.

She ran afoul of supporters of Governor Scott Walker when she took him and other politicians to task for their proposed budget cuts and removal of tenure protection in state law.

“Life is good here,” Goldrick-Rab said when asked how she was doing now. “It’s amazing how much you can do when you’re not being persecuted.”

Identify Options, Move Forward

Although she grew up in a “solid middle-class home” in northern Virginia with a strong tradition of higher education—her grandmother was one of the first women graduates from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University and her grandfather became a social worker thanks to the GI Bill—the 40-year-old Goldrick-Rab experienced tuition’s upward trend personally.

“College prices were high enough that even the middle class was struggling a little,” she said. Told she had to attend a state school, she chose the College of William & Mary to start her undergraduate work; she later received a tuition discount at George Washington University (her mother was an adjunct), where she finished her undergraduate degree.

The tuition discount “didn’t make it affordable,” she recalled. To save money, Goldrick-Rab worked as a waitress, was in only one extracurricular club and finished college in three-and-a-half years.

She earned both her master’s degree and a PhD in sociology from the University of Pennsylvania.

One year into the tenure track at the University of Wisconsin, “I’m married and I want kids.” Because UW did not have paid maternity leave, Goldrick-Rab organized both of her maternity leaves around research that she solicited funding for.

As the first woman in her department to have a baby while on the tenure track, she worked hard to balance her professional and family lives, even bringing one of her babies to nurse during faculty meetings (then comprised solely of older men and Goldrick-Rab).

Other than her children, Goldrick-Rab noted that she is the most proud of her new book, Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream. Published by the University of Chicago Press, the book came out in 2016.

While writing the book, Goldrick-Rab was also going through the trials of divorce after a decade-long marriage. “That’s what you do,” she said about the competing pressures. "When I care about a thing, it has my full attention.” She has since become engaged to another man who “knows I love my work.”

While Goldrick-Rab may seem a bit like Superwoman, it’s “technological support” that enables her to achieve some semblance of balance. She religiously uses her Google Calendar and employs Facebook, rather than phone calls, to stay in touch with relatives and friends. She burns through a laptop every year.

“I’ve chosen this because I love my career,” said Goldrick-Rab.

A “Scholar Activist”

Although she had been doing research on inequality since graduate school, Goldrick-Rab began seriously looking at the topic of affordability in 2008 when UW received a large grant. A portion of the grant funded a study that eventually led to her book.

She also founded the Wisconsin Harvesting Opportunities for Postsecondary Education (HOPE) Lab, the “first laboratory for translational research aimed at improving equitable outcomes in postsecondary education, and finding innovative ways to make college more affordable.” She considers it her “third child.”

The lab, which did “one-off” research, will close when funding ends in 2018 and reopen at Temple as the HOPE Center. The center will focus on “systemic change.”

Calling herself a “scholar-activist,” Goldrick-Rab defines the term as having a scholarly interest on a particular topic and acting on what is learned. She spends her time learning about those who serve homeless students as well as evaluating programs that serve them.

“I feel an obligation to homeless students,” she said. “I personally can’t live with it.”

Goldrick-Rab is currently focused on researching food scholarships. “We don’t study food insecurity in higher education,” she said. By building a food pantry for students, how does that change a college’s perception of itself?

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success, particularly in the face of the system’s sexist and racist traditions.

Had I quit after I’d been repeatedly harassed, John—and patriarchy, overall—would have won.

I’d never let John have such satisfaction.

Dr. Jennifer Cote (drjencote@gmail.com) is an associate professor of history at the University of Saint Joseph in Connecticut, where she teaches courses on the American past. Her own study focuses on gender, science and professionalism in the early 20th century, and she is a weightlifter in her spare time.

An Activist for Students: A Profile of Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab, continued from page 6

Publicity: A Blessing and a Curse

After the media storm in Wisconsin, Goldrick-Rab believes there is such a thing as bad publicity. “Publicity for your work is both a blessing and a curse,” she said, admitting she used to tweet 30 to 50 times a day, but now it’s only three to five times.

“I don’t have room in my life or a desire to do more than that,” she said. “I don’t have as much to say in that media.”

The upside was that the backlash did open up her work to those who are willing to fund it. Students have reached out and want to work with her. She wants to continue mentoring as well as build a network of people who are studying similar topics.

Goldrick-Rab doesn’t deny that her life takes a lot of strength and commitment. “If you’re going to work this hard at it, then it better be that you wake up in the morning and you’re glad you’re working on it,” she said. “It’s completely legitimate to have a job where you go to work and come home.”

When asked what advice she would give to other women, Goldrick-Rab was quick to respond. “Get over the fact that everyone has to like you or that life is a popularity contest. It’s not.

“Women are obsessed with what people think of them,” she said. “I’m there to get the work done.”

—MLS

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