Working Part Time After Tenure

BY SHARON LOBEL

This tenured professor created a solution that works well for her. Luckily, she’s willing to share her insights with the rest of us.

Much of the dialogue about part-time faculty on the tenure track has focused on individuals who have not yet earned tenure and whose chances of obtaining it may be affected by the challenges of bearing or raising children. As a pretenure faculty member with young children, I pursued the path of many colleagues in academia: I found quality child care and devoted intense time and energy to building my publishing record and reputation. As I look back on that crazy period, I have no regrets about the choices I made. It wasn’t until after I obtained tenure that I felt the pull to devote more time to my family. My dad had Alzheimer’s,

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NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2004 35
and I found to my surprise that a middle-school-aged child required an even more watchful eye than a preschooler. My younger son, a kindergartner, was another factor.

At work, I was undergoing an ultimately successful review for promotion to full professor. The events outside work, however, spurred me to submit a proposal for a three-year contract for uncompensated part-time personal leave, which my university granted "under extraordinary and compelling circumstances."

The initial proposal and approval process seemed fairly routine. At the end of the three-year period, however, when I decided to propose an extension of my half-time contract, I knew I would face greater challenges. My father had died, and my older son was on the right path in high school. Nonetheless, I had become convinced that being available to my younger son, and my family more broadly, was vitally important to my personal definition of success.

The proposal for an extension, I discovered, could not be dealt with on an ad hoc basis; it had to be approved by the provost, after consideration by a council of all the deans. A favorable decision on my case would be institutionalized by an amendment to the faculty handbook extending the time allowed for uncompensated personal leave. Deliberations were under way when a full professor in my department told me she was interested in a part-time contract. We decided to propose a job-share agreement. Our job share was approved for six years, with a stipulation that each of us would give up the other half of our position.

Our arrangement solved my immediate problem of extending my part-time status. My case does not apply to faculty members without a suitable job share partner who want to extend their part-time status beyond the three years stipulated in the handbook. Still, I believe I have some insights about the process of negotiating a part-time contract that pertain to other settings. In addition, after five years as a part-time tenured full professor, I understand the benefits, as well as the drawbacks, of being a part-time academic.

Negotiation Tactics
I teach in the business school, and my research expertise lies in the area of work and personal life. I am familiar with, and have contributed to, the literature on flexible work arrangements in organizations and managerial attitudes that facilitate or inhibit flexible organizational cultures. In negotiating my own arrangement, therefore, I had a unique information advantage relative to many other faculty members who might be in the same situation. My guiding principles were: (a) leave a legacy, and (b) anticipate resistance.

Of course, an individual has personal motives for wanting to work part time. Indeed, it may seem like the process is primarily between you and the administration. But it is precisely because so few faculty members have traveled this path that the process and outcome for you could set a precedent for others at your institution and beyond. You therefore need to proceed with caution. Consider the effect of your efforts not only on you, but also on your colleagues. If you mess up, you mess up for other people, too. This perspective is important, not only during the negotiation process, but also once you are a part-time faculty member. Work hard to set a good example.

Resistance is predictable and natural. Don't get angry or frustrated. Instead, do your homework. According to one administrator, my proposal looked like a research paper. Exactly! Marshall the evidence. Cite reputable sources. Offer resources for administrators to consult. To reduce the inevitable resistance, any proposal should explain clearly why allowing part-time status is good for the university. It should address predictable concerns and any that surface during the informal discussion process. And it should demonstrate your willingness to be flexible in negotiating the specifics of the contract.

The Proposal
Personal motives should be explained briefly. The description should emphasize values. For example, "My husband and I believe a parental presence is important throughout adolescence—in some ways, more important than in the early years"; or, "My part-time schedule would provide our family with one adult who is predictably available to our children, and we believe children's well-being depends on consistent support."

The bulk of the proposal should address the inevitable concerns and focus on why allowing part-time status is good for the university. So why is it good for the university? There are three major reasons: the university achieves cost savings, the commitment among part-time faculty to the institution increases, and these faculty have more time and energy for teaching and research.

Once your salary is cut in half, the university will reallocate the surplus to other purposes. In the short term, the institution may need to hire adjunct faculty to cover the extra courses you are not teaching. For better or worse, contract faculty are typically less expensive than tenured professors. In my situation, when my job-share partner and I released the other half of our positions, our department created a new position and hired a junior faculty member. The university did, in fact, reduce salary expenditures through this arrangement. Another source of cost savings comes from the well-documented finding that part-time professionals tend to work more hours than they are compensated for. The university may end up with a full-time faculty member who is paid for half time. I will address this issue below.

The argument has been made that the flexibility gained through part-time status becomes a means for pretenure faculty to achieve satisfactory performance and tenure. The
post-tenure situation differs. Presumably, the individual has already demonstrated her commitment and ability to succeed by having earned tenure and promotion. Indeed, research suggests that the transition from full- to part-time status works best when an individual has already demonstrated success in a full-time position. A faculty member might be prevented from performing well in a full-time position because of difficulty meeting competing demands from personal and work life. But administrators assume less risk when they offer a part-time option to someone who has already proven that he or she is a “player.” Remind administrators that you have a solid record and that you expect the arrangement to have a neutral or, preferably, positive impact on your already high commitment. For me, the university’s flexibility has increased my morale and commitment. My experience is a typical positive reaction to employer flexibility.

A reduced workload will enable a successful faculty member to excel in the classes or research projects he undertakes. Presumably, if you have half the number of students, you can be more generous with your time and energy within a given framework of hours. Students have rated my accessibility, for example, as higher than that of the average faculty member. Similarly, if you cut back your research, you can focus on what really counts and interests you. You may decide, for example, to publish only refereed articles rather than chapters. Class evaluations and publications are a measure of performance, so administrators can easily tell if the arrangement is working for them.

Make sure to address the likely sources of resistance in your proposal. Identify concerns and respond appropriately, using documentation to the extent possible. Key issues include: What if everyone wants to go on a reduced schedule? How can we make this arrangement equitable for others? How do we decide who qualifies for part-time status and who doesn’t?

What if everyone wants to go on a reduced schedule? Researchers who study flexible work arrangements have found that, in practice, few employees can afford voluntarily to work a reduced schedule. In a 1993 study, Flexible Work Arrangements II, researchers at Catalyst, a nonprofit organization working to advance women in business, reported that a number of the fourteen employees in the study who returned to full-time work did so for financial reasons.

How can we make this arrangement equitable for other faculty? Flexible work arrangements—whether they involve part-time hours, job sharing, or telecommuting—must meet business or organizational needs to be feasible. Part-time positions, like sabbaticals, probably affect smaller departments more significantly than larger ones. Still, the part-time faculty member should not perform the same level of service as full-time colleagues; others may need to be reminded that she earns less so that resentment does not arise. If the service load of other faculty members increases to an unacceptable degree and the part-time situation is not short term, the part-time faculty member may need to agree to give up the unused portion of his position to permit hiring another faculty member.

How do we decide who qualifies for part-time status and who doesn’t? The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 has an exception for key employees, who are defined as the highest-paid 10 percent of employees. These individuals may be denied reinstatement to their jobs following leave “if substantial and grievous economic injury would result from the reinstatement.” In other words, making a part-time option available to some faculty does not weaken the university’s ability to deny leave to individuals if the economic or programmatic impact would be detrimental to the university. An equitable flexible work arrangement policy does not mean that everyone must be treated the same.

The accounting firm KPMG has developed a part-time option “for people who need to care for a child or elderly and whose situation requires more personal attention than can be feasibly committed when working in a traditional full-time arrangement.” The program is not designed to handle situations in which, for example, an individual wants to return to school, work, or serve the community part time. Universities can similarly restrict access to part-time tenured positions to specific circumstances.

Many practitioners and researchers who have implemented or studied flexible work arrangements have found that employees can be valuable resources in planning for coverage of their duties during their absence and suggesting solutions to problems that might arise. If several people in a unit or department want flexible schedules, it may not be feasible to accommodate all of them. Nonetheless, Flexible Work Options, a 1997 guidebook published by Motorola University Press, suggests: “Challenge your team to develop a plan or work schedule that accommodates flexible schedules. View this as a challenge in development of your own management skills and an opportunity for more creativity in designing how work gets done rather than as a negative situation. When everyone is involved, the chances for success are greater.”

The last part of the proposal should demonstrate your flexibility, that is, your willingness to work with the
administration to arrive at a solution satisfactory to all concerned. You might, for example, propose that the department or school clarify expectations for productivity relative to other individuals in your rank. Such expectations might be that you (a) serve on at least x committees each year (at the university, school, or departmental level), (b) have x manuscripts accepted or in working-paper form in three years, and (c) maintain average teaching ratings equivalent to the average rating in your school or university over a three-year period. In addition, you might agree that your contract will be subject to evaluation every one, two, or three years. Close by expressing your interest in addressing any concerns in order to come up with a proposal that works for everyone.

**Benefits and Drawbacks**

Is it harder to negotiate the proposal or to make it work afterward? It’s difficult to say. Working part time has its obvious benefits. If you combine a reduced teaching load with a suitable teaching schedule, you should be able to meet your goals for life outside of work. I can be home after school, go on field trips, volunteer, and exercise. You should also be able to moderate your service activities and research to fit a reduced workload. These efforts require more vigilance, however, since it is harder to cut service in half than it is to cut courses in half.

Drawbacks include reduced income, a higher cost for benefits if they are prorated, and lower contributions by the employer to a 401(k) plan. A less obvious financial problem is a potential slowing in merit increases because of perceptions of reduced contribution or commitment. Even if you are not as productive as a full-time colleague, it is important to document your achievements and remind decision makers of them so that evaluations are based on actual output, not perceptions.

I believe it is a good idea to make one’s part-time status visible to the extent possible. I do not announce to my students that I work part time. I often do not mention my status to research colleagues. No one needs to know you are a part-time faculty member. Many full-time professors are not accessible 100 percent of the time. Advertising one’s status is probably going to cause people to label as “lapses” behaviors that might otherwise be considered reasonable.

Regarding the tendency to work more than half time for half-time pay, I find it useful to keep in mind that working hours are increasing across the board for most professions. A full-time professional does not necessarily work forty-hour week. Fifty or perhaps sixty is the norm. So half time is undoubtedly going to be more than twenty hours. Some people may choose to document the hours that they work. I believe it is best to learn to set your own boundaries. Indeed, part-time work may help develop this valuable skill, which is important for everyone.

As I mentioned above, it helps to specify expectations for performance up front. If this is not done, you may need to revisit this issue periodically. Faculty members may have reduced teaching loads for a range of reasons—a chair of a department or a faculty member with an endowed chair, for example, might have reduced teaching loads. Still, these individuals work full-time hours, and it is reasonable to expect full-time productivity from them. By contrast, a part-time faculty member’s performance should be prorated. Our recently adopted faculty evaluation document indicates that “expectations will be adjusted as appropriate to match the portion of a position that the faculty member holds.”

Extraordinary research performance for a full-time faculty member at our institution is defined as having “four publications in high-quality, reputable journals in the past two years.” A part-time professor should therefore be considered extraordinary with two publications in two years. Alternatively, a full-time colleague might have one refereed publication in a high-quality journal and four book chapters in the past two years. For a part-time faculty member, one refereed publication, or evidence of significant research toward that end, and two book chapters should therefore work. At my university, I am expected to remain “academically qualified” as defined by the accrediting board in conjunction with the school. These standards define minimum levels of ongoing scholarship expected of tenure-track faculty members.

Our school does not quantify expectations for service, as in number of committees on which one must serve or the number of outside activities in which one must participate. It would thus seem reasonable to look at the performance of faculty members who received the highest evaluations for service and cut it in half as the benchmark for the highest rating among part-time colleagues. Any move to quantify expectations helps part-time faculty manage expectations and perceptions. But full-time faculty stand to gain as well from clear goals and standards.

In sum, the part-time route solves some problems, but it may create others. Possible drawbacks—which are almost inevitable—include the potential for work hours to creep upward and for the productivity of part-time faculty to be compared directly to that of full-time colleagues rather than prorated for hours worked. Part-time faculty will therefore need to advocate actively on their own behalf and on that of others who may follow their example.

**Note**

1. In a 1997 study, more than 50 percent of professional employees who reduced their hours to part time indicated that their workloads did not decrease, and 10 percent said they had more work. See the “When Work Works” project on the Families and Work Institute’s Web site: http://familiesandwork.org/3w/research/3w.html.