

Work-Life Balance and Career Experiences of Part-Time Versus Full-Time Faculty at the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Part-time faculty are an important part of the academic medical workforce, comprising 11–21% of faculty in some institutions.

OBJECTIVE: To describe the part-time faculty experience at a single institution across four domains: work-life balance, work environment, leadership and advancement, and mentorship.

METHODS: Faculty from the Division of Biology and Medicine at Brown University were invited to participate in an electronic survey. The authors compared responses between full-time and part-time faculty across the four domains.

RESULTS: Survey response rate was 43% (437/1025). Of the 363 who answered the question about employment status, 333 (92%) were full-time and 30 (8%) were part-time. Part-time faculty were *less likely* to report forgoing personal activities for professional responsibilities, that work conflicted with personal life, that their division director took interest in their careers, and having a leadership position was important to them.

CONCLUSION: Part-time and full-time faculty reported significant differences in perception of work impact on personal life, division director support, and desire for leadership positions.

INTRODUCTION

Part-time faculty, those working less than a full-time equivalent, comprise a significant segment of the workforce in academic medicine, ranging from approximately 11–21% of faculty across departments and institutions in some studies.^{1,2,3} In a 2011 survey of 126 U.S. medical schools, approximately 21,200 clinical faculty and 1,950 basic science faculty were part-time.³

The increasing prevalence of part-time faculty in academic medicine may be attributed partly to the shifting demographics of the physician workforce and greater desire for work-life balance. Between 1975 and 2001, the number of women entering medical school doubled from 24% to 48% of the class, and women now comprise half of U.S. medical

students.⁴ In a 2012 survey of graduating medical students, over 75% reported that work-life balance influenced their specialty choice and 10% stated that they intended to work part-time upon completion of training.⁵ The primary reasons faculty cited for choosing part-time appointments were to enhance work-life balance and to care for their dependent children.⁶

Some medical schools have steadily increased their flexibility and support for part-time faculty through appointment and tenure policies. In addition, a majority of U.S. medical schools – including the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University – have tenure-clock-stopping policies that may be used by faculty caring for children or sick family members. Approximately one-third of medical schools have policies that allow tenured faculty to work less than full-time.⁷

Despite increasing support for part-time academic options in medicine, these policies are underutilized by faculty and controversy still exists.^{11,8,9} Studies of part-time faculty satisfaction with work environment, academic support, mentorship, promotion opportunities, and compensation show mixed results.^{10,11,12} This study examined the part-time faculty experience in a single institution across four domains of academic medical careers: 1) work-life balance 2) work environment, 3) leadership, advancement and promotion, and 4) mentorship.

METHODS

We analyzed survey data collected from faculty in the Division of Biology and Medicine at Brown University in May 2013. All academic faculty from the Division were invited to participate, including faculty from the 13 clinical departments (from The Warren Alpert Medical School), 5 basic science departments, 1 hybrid department (i.e., clinical and basic science), and 4 public health departments. Faculty in the research, (research), teaching, clinician educator, and undeclared academic tracks were invited to participate; the survey did not include volunteer clinical faculty.

The survey content was developed by the Office of Women in Medicine and Science advisory board. Survey administration was co-sponsored by the Office of the Dean of Biology and Medicine, the Office of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs, and the Office of BioMed Faculty Affairs. A total

of 74 investigator-generated items focused on 5 areas: work climate, leadership and advancement, mentorship, gender and diversity, and work-life balance. The present study did not examine the domain of gender and diversity. Response types included Likert scales, yes/no answers, and free text response sections. The survey was anonymous and eight optional demographic questions related to gender, race/ethnicity, and age were included at the end of the survey.

The survey was distributed electronically using the Illume platform (DatStat, Seattle WA). The original survey was exempted by the Brown University Institutional Review Board and the present analyses were exempted by the Rhode Island Hospital Institutional Review Board.

SAS software 9.4 (SAS Inc., Cary, NC) was used for analyses. Respondents who answered “no” to the question “Are you considered a full-time employee?” were considered part-time. Differences between part-time and full-time faculty responses on Likert-type questions concerning work-life balance, work climate, leadership, advancement, mentorship and gender were examined using generalized modeling, assuming a binomial distribution (0–3 or 0–2, depending on the range of the response scale). For binary survey questions (e.g., “Do you provide health insurance for your family?”), the same modeling procedure was used, assuming a binary distribution. The interaction between faculty status (part-time vs. full-time) and gender (male vs. female) was also modeled using the above methods. PROC GLIMMIX was used for all modeling, with interval estimates calculated at 95% confidence and alpha at the 0.05 level.

RESULTS

Sample

Of 1025 eligible faculty, 437 (43%) completed the survey. Of the 363 who answered the question regarding work status, 30 (8%) did not identify as a full-time employee and were therefore considered part-time. The remaining 333 (92%) indicated that they worked full-time.

Demographic Characteristics

Gender and age distributions were similar between the part-time and full-time groups. Assistant professor was the most common current rank for both groups. A large percentage of full-time faculty (56%) reported an average work week of 41–60 hours and 42% reported 61–80 hours. Among part-time faculty, although the majority (16 of 30) reported a 41–60 hour work week, 8 reported working <40 hours per week and 5 reported working 61–80 hours per week (Table 1).

Work and Personal Life Balance

Although both part-time and full-time faculty found that work conflicted with personal life, part-time faculty were significantly less likely to experience the conflict. In

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents

	Part-time, N (%)	Full-time, N (%)
Sex		
Male	10 (43%)	123 (45%)
Female	13 (57%)	148 (55%)
Age		
25–35	1 (4%)	22 (8%)
36–46	9 (39%)	120 (45%)
47–57	8 (35%)	77 (29%)
58 +	5 (22%)	49 (18%)
Avg. hours of work per week		
< 20	1 (3%)	1 (<1%)
20–40	7 (24%)	5 (2%)
41–60	16 (55%)	185 (56%)
61–80	5 (17%)	141 (42%)
% of professional time[†]		
Research	22.6 (32.45)	35.18 (31.53)
Teaching	16.77 (16.12)	15.32 (11.61)
Clinical	41.83 (29.40)	27.83 (28.23)
Service	4.50 (4.75)	7.48 (6.92)
Administration	7.07 (16.84)	12.24 (16.26)
Other	7.23 (20.39)	1.95 (4.87)
Current Rank		
Instructor	0 (0%)	1 (<1%)
Assistant professor	13 (43%)	144 (44%)
Associate professor	9 (30%)	80 (24%)
Full professor	7 (23%)	94 (29%)
Other	1 (3%)	8 (2%)

[†] Represented by mean (standard deviation) and “total” as range. In the survey, participants entered a numerical estimate of the percentage of professional time spent on various tasks.

addition, part-time faculty were less likely to report forgoing personal activities because of professional responsibilities. There was no significant difference between part-time and full-time faculty in their perceptions that they forgo professional activities because of personal responsibilities. (Table 2)

Overall, there was no significant difference between part-time and full-time faculty reporting that department leadership was supportive of faculty who wanted balance in their personal and professional lives (on average, both groups “somewhat agreed” with this question). (Table 2)

Both part-time and full-time faculty disagreed with the statement that female faculty who have children are considered by department members to be less committed to their careers than faculty without children; there was no significant difference between the two groups. Although

Table 2. Faculty Responses to Likert-type Survey Questions

Survey Questions	Part-time, mean	Part-time, SD	Full-time, mean	Full-time, SD	p-value
Conflict Between Professional and Personal Responsibilities Response scale: 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, and 3 = frequently					
Work conflict with personal life	2.1	0.74	2.4	0.70	0.02*
Forgo personal activities for professional responsibilities	1.9	0.73	2.3	0.74	0.001*
Forgo professional activities for personal responsibilities	1.8	0.87	1.7	0.83	0.37
Departmental Support and Career Progression Response scale: 0 = strongly disagree, 1 = somewhat disagree, 2 = somewhat agree, 3 = strongly agree					
Department leadership supports faculty who want work-life balance	2.0	0.71	2.0	0.86	0.87
Department meetings frequently occur outside of work day	1.5	0.99	0.9	1.07	0.002*
Department supportive of half- or three-quarter time positions	2.3	0.78	1.7	1.06	0.006*
Career Commitments of Parents Based on Gender Response scale: 0 = strongly disagree, 1 = somewhat disagree, 2 = somewhat agree, 3 = strongly agree					
Female faculty who have children are considered by department members to be less committed to their careers	1.0	0.91	0.8	0.97	0.38
Male faculty who have children are considered by department members to be less committed to their careers	0.7	0.80	0.4	0.66	0.04*
Work Climate – Respect Response scale: 0 = none of the time, 1 = some of the time, 2 = most of the time, and 3 = all of the time					
How often are you treated with respect by your peers?	2.37	0.56	2.40	0.62	0.78
Work Climate - Support Response scale: 0 = not at all, 1 = a little bit, 2 = somewhat, and 3 = very much					
How much does your department chair take an interest in your career?	1.76	1.12	2.02	1.03	0.20
How much does your division director take an interest in your career?	1.25	1.16	2.02	1.09	0.004*
How satisfied are you with opportunities to collaborate with faculty in your department? ^b	1.90	0.96	2.18	0.86	0.09
Leadership, Advancement and Promotion Response Scale 0 = strongly disagree, 1 = somewhat disagree, 2 = somewhat agree, and 3 = strongly agree.					
Having a departmental, university, or administrative leadership position is important to me.	1.52	1.06	2.02	0.88	0.009*
I am aware of the requirements for promotion.	2.48	0.57	2.42	0.69	0.61
The criteria for promotion and/or tenure are clearly communicated and documented in advance of the decision-making process.	2.03	0.78	2.04	0.84	0.97
Hiring, promotion, and/or tenure decisions are based on objective criteria such as a candidate's experience, skills, and abilities in relationship to faculty requirements.	2.07	0.59	2.06	0.82	0.95
I receive the support I need for professional advancement at the university	1.55	1.02	1.70	0.92	0.45
I have been overlooked for a promotion that I believe I deserved.	0.41	0.75	0.61	0.94	0.24

* sig. at the p < 0.01 level

respondents also disagreed with the statement that male faculty with children were less committed to their careers, full-time faculty more strongly disagreed with this statement compared to part-time faculty (Table 2).

Work Climate

Part-time faculty were significantly less likely to feel their division director took interest in their career as compared to full time faculty. However, there was no statistically significant difference between part-time and full-time faculty in their response to “how often are you treated with respect

by your peers” and “how much does your department chair take an interest in your career” (Table 2).

Leadership, Advancement and Promotion

Part-time faculty were significantly less likely to feel that “having a department, university or administrative leadership position is important” to them, as compared to full-time faculty. Furthermore, there was no statistically significant differences between part-time and full-time faculty in how much supervisors have encouraged or discouraged leadership roles (Table 2).

Table 3. Faculty Responses to Binary Survey Questions

Survey Questions	Part-time, % yes	Full-time, % yes	p-value
Mentorship			
Do you have at least one person locally whom you consider a mentor?	55	59	0.33
Do you have at least one person elsewhere whom you consider a mentor?	50	56	0.22
I have mentored another faculty member	52	56	0.63

Responses on binary scale (yes/no)

Mentorship

No significant differences were found for questions addressing mentorship between part-time and full-time faculty (Table 3).

Discussion

In our study, part-time and full-time faculty generally reported similar experiences in work-life balance, work environment, leadership and advancement, and mentorship. However, the two groups reported significant differences in their perception of the impact of work on personal life, support from division directors, and desire for leadership positions.

Our study supports the concept that part-time faculty may have better preservation of their personal life than full-time faculty. Although there was no difference between part-time and full-time faculty in their report of care-giving roles or in their perception of departmental support of work-life balance, part-time faculty found they could better protect their personal activities from professional obligations. Our findings support a previous study by Pollart et al. where the most frequently identified reasons for working part-time were to enhance work-life balance and care for dependent children.¹⁴

In our sample, when compared to part-time faculty respondents, full-time faculty more strongly disagreed with the statement that male faculty with children were less committed to their careers. Previous studies examining gender differences in perceived organizational commitment have shown a wide range of results, including gender differences in attributing greater professional commitment to women or to men. Scandura and Lankau found that women reported greater commitment to work if their employers offered flexible work hours, but this finding was not observed in men.¹³ More recent data by Budig suggest that, in general, women's careers are negatively impacted if they have children, whereas men's careers are positively impacted; this difference diminished in higher-paying careers.¹⁴

In the work environment, part-time faculty felt as supported by department chairs as their full-time counterparts. This finding is consistent with the study by Socolar and Kelman, which found that most department chairs were

very satisfied with having part-time faculty and cited various advantages for employing them, including the opportunity to keep talented faculty in the workforce, to leverage financial resources, and to retain specific skills of their part-time faculty.¹⁵

In our study, although both full-time and part-time faculty reported career interest by their division director, part-time faculty were significantly less likely to feel that their division director took interest in their career than full-time faculty. This difference may in part be due to the managerial role of the division director compared to that of the department chair. The disadvantages of employing part-time faculty cited by Socolar and Kelman, including scheduling problems and less commitment by faculty, are perhaps felt more by those directly supervising part-time faculty, such as the division directors.

In our sample, part-time faculty were significantly more likely than full-time faculty to state their department was supportive of half-time or three-quarter time positions. Full-time faculty may be less aware that such positions are supported by their departments. Given the benefits of working part-time identified in our study and in others,¹⁶ including better work-life balance and less physician burn-out, departments may consider more widespread acknowledgment and support of part-time positions as viable career options.

With respect to leadership and advancement, part-time faculty were less likely to identify leadership positions as a priority. Whether this is a view carried consistently through one's career or a reflection of feelings at the time of the survey is unknown. For example, 23% of part-time faculty were full professors who may have held leadership positions in the past. Junior faculty working part-time to balance demands of career and family life may aspire to leadership positions after their children are grown. In addition, although part-time faculty found promotion criteria to be objective and clearly communicated and did not feel they had been overlooked for a promotion that they deserved, they were nonetheless less likely to expect promotion at the time of the survey. These findings do not necessarily reflect lack of interest or commitment by part-time faculty to be productive members of their departments.

This study has several limitations. First, the small sample size of part-time faculty (n=30) may not be representative or may be underpowered for some analyses. The survey did not provide a clear definition for part-time work. Not initially designed to compare part-time and full-time faculty, the survey queried the respondents "Are you considered a full-time employee?" Those who responded "no" were considered part-time in this analysis. Some respondents might have been mis-categorized if, for example, they worked half-time at 2 different institutions. Second, the similarity in gender distribution and number of hours worked between the part-time and full-time groups raises the question if indeed the two groups are distinct. The gender distribution

of the part-time group mirrored that of the full-time group, and the majority of all respondents, part-time and full-time, reported working 41–60 hours per week. Third, the response rate of 43% may reflect self-selective sampling of respondents that favored certain groups. Finally, as a single institution study, the finding may not be generalizable to medical schools across the U.S.

CONCLUSION

Part-time and full-time faculty reported significant differences in their perception of professional impact on personal life, division director support, and desire for leadership positions. Further research is needed to understand how part-time positions in academic medicine may be structured to align values and goals of faculty and institutions and to identify avenues for academic advancement that reflect priorities of part-time faculty.

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Disclaimers

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