CAREERS

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Part-time balance

Flexible academic positions help women to juggle work and family. Kate O’Brien and Karen Hapgood explain how to avoid the ‘female ghetto’ when working part time.

When scientists become mothers, many seek part-time positions to maintain their careers while still spending significant time with their families. But they might not anticipate the downside: part-timers can lose research time and seniority. In academia, they risk being funnelled into teaching positions that can exclude them from research. But there are ways around this.

Part-timers are generally at a disadvantage when competing with full-time colleagues. Full-timers’ higher productivity leads to more funding and attracts top-quality collaborators, postdocs and graduate students, so part-time researchers, who are often women, can fall behind. Teaching and administration further reduce the part-timer’s research time. And yet they are frequently assessed on the same scale as their full-time colleagues, using metrics that do not account for either their part-time status or the longer time they spend in ‘early-career’ phase, when output is understandably low. An absence of role models exacerbates this; most or all other academics in the department, particularly senior ones, will be full-time tenure-track. This creates a discouraging situation in which capable women working at a high level may still be judged poorly. There is also a risk of a ‘female ghetto’ — a tier of women with fewer opportunities for promotion and job security.

A PATH TO SUCCESS

The part-time model is much more viable in teaching-focused roles, in which evaluation is often based on current performance rather than on accumulated output. Also, teaching does not have the same minimum participation rate as research, and allows ready flexibility. Part-time staff naturally drift towards teaching, or can be pushed there by management — they are often allocated disproportionately high teaching loads because of their reduced research productivity. Consequently, many female academics focus on teaching at the expense of research. Teaching contracts can be a workable, flexible and fun way to remain engaged with science while your children grow, but it is difficult to re-enter research from teaching later.

Yet it is not impossible to pursue a part-time career in scientific research while devoting time and creative energy to raising children. Choose a role that lets you maintain and build your skills, and define success on your own terms. Developing a research group and teaching in a tenure-track role will be difficult part time unless you are already quite advanced in your career; a contract role in a strong research group might bring less prestige and security, but will let you develop your expertise and build a track record in preparation for a successful tenured position when your children are older.

Choose an organization that is friendly to...
part-time workers. You will need a manager who can appreciate your contribution and nurture your development. Find out about the presence and status of other part-time scientists; schemes that support career re-entry; and whether there are limitations on part-time staff supervising PhD students or applying for funding. A good manager will recognize that your worth is unlikely to be directly reflected in metrics that have been developed for and by full-time academics. Be sure that your institution, directors and manager will allocate part-time teaching and administration loads fairly, and are willing to adjust metrics and milestones to account for career stage, part-time status and other duties (such as teaching).

If you are in a tenured position, take the initiative and find solutions that will work for you and your department. Negotiate for all your teaching duties to be in one semester, so you can dedicate the other to continuous research. Collaborate with or join a research team in which your expertise is valued, your part-time status is accepted and you can work with established researchers. This may require compromise and concentration on one key research area.

Recognize where part-time work provides an advantage over more conventional employment. A part-time postdoc, research fellow or contract researcher can adapt to workloads that vary with the cycles of grant funding, and provide continuity and management in a lab group. At the same time, the part-timer can maintain and build their own expertise so that they can embark on more ambitious projects if they return to full-time work after a few years, or even decades.

You need to be brave to undertake an unusual career path. You may be unsuccessful according to the metrics used by administrators, and your performance may be judged poorly against that of full-time scientists. Maintaining confidence in your abilities will be difficult under these conditions. Wise mentoring, and acquaintance with others who have worked part-time or follow non-traditional career paths, can help you to negotiate the system.

You must be patient with your ambitions, and with your managers and colleagues as they adapt to working with part-time researchers. Above all, enjoy your time with your children. Your full-time colleagues will be promoted ahead of you, but there will be time to focus more on your career once your children have grown. ■

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