

Split positions can provide a sane career track—a personal account

Seventeen years ago, we accepted offers from Oregon State University (OSU) for what was then considered a novel arrangement in academia. At our request, OSU split a single assistant professor position into two separate, half-time assistant professor positions. This arrangement was our solution to the dilemma facing many dual-career couples: how to juggle family and careers. We already had two full-time assistant professor positions elsewhere, but we wanted an arrangement in which each of us could have more time to spend with the children we planned to have without sacrificing the teaching and research we enjoyed. Members of the OSU community were willing to experiment and try something unconventional.

Our split position worked well. It allowed us to combine teaching and research with starting and raising a family (our two boys are now 11 and 14). After ten years at half-time, our positions were gradually increased to full-time. We are now both tenured professors, and Jane served as department chair from 1989 to 1992. Because the university has allowed three other split appointments patterned after ours, the arrangement seems to have been good for the university as well as for us.

This job arrangement has worked well for us, and we think others should have the opportunities we did. Many other scientists, especially graduate students, have inquired about the details of our positions, suggesting that interest in alternative arrangements runs high. We want to focus attention on viable alternatives to traditional arrangements in academia, specifically, alternatives that will facilitate greater participation by women in

scientific professions and arrangements in which both partners are able to spend more time parenting without having to sacrifice career goals. Our employment experience has been limited to research universities, thus our comments are pertinent primarily to those institutions.

In this article, we offer a personal account of our arrangement. We do so knowing that our solution is neither unique (others have split positions) nor universal (no option is appropriate for everyone). We share our experiences with more than a little trepidation, for we are by nature private individuals. Nonetheless, we are strongly motivated by what we perceive as an unappreciated opportunity that could be more broadly exploited. The following account provides information about our motivation, specifics of our appointments, conditions required for such arrangements, our views of the pros and cons of this kind of appointment, and, finally, suggestions about how part-time but mainstream appointments might attract more women into science and also enhance overall faculty well-being and performance. The reader should know from the outset that we are highly biased: we feel that splitting a position was the best arrangement for us and that mainstream fractional appointments should be more widely available in academia.

Our motivation for seeking alternative arrangements

In 1975–1976, we had what many couples think is the ideal employment arrangement: two full-time, good jobs in the same city. Bruce had been an assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts in Boston since 1971, and Jane was a neophyte assistant professor at Harvard University. We were both fully committed to and consumed by our multifaceted jobs:

teaching graduate and undergraduate ecology and marine biology courses, investigating the ecological dynamics of rocky intertidal communities along the shores of New England, advising students and exposing them to the fun and challenge of doing research, serving on committees and panels, reviewing research proposals and manuscripts, in short, all of the things that assistant professors usually do. Our research programs (involving both laboratory and field research) were particularly time-consuming, but fun. We participated actively in various sports, but we had little real discretionary time.

We both wanted to have a family but had difficulty imagining when we would be able to squeeze in enough time with our children. We both wished to be active participants in raising our children and to spend significant amounts of time with them. However, neither of us wanted to give up teaching or research. Moreover, we understood that traditional part-time positions in academia take scientists out of the mainstream with little opportunity to reenter. We wanted to have it all but not go crazy in the process. We sought not what later came to be called “the mommy track,” in which career goals would be sacrificed, nor the so-called “fast track,” which we were already on and for us would have precluded having sufficient time with our children, but rather what we intended as a “sane track.” The ideal arrangement seemed to be one in which we could each work part-time but do so in mainstream positions.

We had the role model of Jane's mother, a pediatrician who practiced part-time when her six daughters were young. She had figured out a way to practice medicine and raise a family. She always told her daughters, “Where there's a will, there's a way.” We took that advice to heart.

by Jane Lubchenco and
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It was important to us that we have equivalent positions. We did not want an arrangement in which one of us had a full-time faculty position and the other a research appointment, like many couples we knew. In addition to the second-class status accorded to the latter, we felt that the asymmetry might be resented by one of us at a later time. Moreover, we each liked both teaching and research. So, armed with the criteria of part-time but equivalent positions involving both teaching and research, we began to discuss options for alternative arrangements with selected academic institutions advertising jobs in our field.

The evolution of our split position

We knew of no other arrangements anything like what we envisioned could work for us, so we set about figuring how to do it. We learned as we went: what the stumbling blocks would be in creating alternate arrangements and what sorts of solutions were possible.

We applied selectively to jobs advertised in our field if they were in locations where we wanted to live and where appropriate research sites were nearby. (Rocky intertidal marine ecologists have limited options if they wish to live anywhere near their research sites.) We tailored our applications to convey two messages: each of us was interested in the position, and we wished to explore arrangements involving both of us. For a single advertised job, we each prepared an application but submitted them together in a single packet with a joint cover letter. This joint letter said that each of us was interested in applying for the position advertised, that we wanted to be judged first as individuals, and if the department found both our applications strong and was interested in both of us, we would appreciate the opportunity to explore arrangements involving the two of us. Thus, we did not define or demand any specific arrangement, but left open possibilities for dialogue. We felt it was important that each of us be first judged on our own merits.

We received a wide range of responses. Some institutions were interested primarily or exclusively in one of us. Our applications coincided with the early days of affirmative action,

and many institutions were actively looking for female faculty. Some institutions wanted a full-time woman, not a part-time one, and so were not at all interested in splitting a position. Other universities were more interested in Bruce because he was better known, having four more years of experience. However, the overwhelming response we received was a very conservative reaction: one focusing almost exclusively on the potential problems, not on the possible benefits or even on the over-all balance between the two. The most common reactions were, "But what if you get divorced?" or "What would we do about tenure?" "How would we arrange benefits?" instead of "Let's consider how this might work."

These responses focused our attention on the importance of establishing separate positions, each independent of the other. Hence, we speak of a split or fractional position instead of a joint or shared position.

What is a split position?

A split position is an arrangement in which a single position is divided into two separate, part-time positions. In our case, OSU took a single, nine-month assistant professor 1.0 FTE (full-time equivalent) tenure-track position and split it into two separate, independent, half-time (0.5 FTE), nine-month, tenure-track positions. Each position is independent; each has a separate contract. Each has a separate commitment to do half of the usual teaching, research, and service. Each has separate benefits. Each is eligible for tenure. Each is reviewed independently of the other. Because the two positions are independent, they need not be at the same rank.

Splitting a position is thus distinct from sharing a position. In job-sharing, the individuals share a single job, working out between them who will cover which responsibility. We do not know of any such arrangement in academia, and we find it difficult to envision how promotion or tenure decisions would be made or benefits arranged.

Other part-time arrangements

Other part-time but mainstream positions may be desirable for a variety of

reasons, either for couples or for individuals. Some couples have split one and a half positions, for example, with each holding a 0.75 FTE position. Regardless of the actual FTE, if two individuals are involved, the critical concept of independence of the positions remains.

For an individual who wishes to teach and do research on a part-time but mainstream basis, similar fractional but tenure-track positions might be highly attractive. This kind of position might be desirable for many of the same reasons as a couple might wish to split a position. A parent might wish, for example, to work just part-time while his or her children are young.

Most traditional, part-time faculty positions in universities are not tenure track, have little future, and do not permit the combination of teaching and research. Because advancement in academia proceeds in a highly specified series of steps, it is difficult for individuals to advance or for universities to evaluate them once they are in non-tenure-track positions. Thus, it is vital for individuals who aspire to tenured positions to enter and remain in tenure-track lines.

Regardless of whether a couple splits a job or an individual holds a part-time position, the desired feature here is an option allowing a professional to work part-time, but in a mainstream position. A split position is simply a special case (i.e., one for couples) of a more general part-time, but tenure-track appointment.

Conditions required for split or other fractional positions

In our experience, four conditions are necessary for a split position or other tenure-track part-time position: the institution must allow part-time positions to be tenured, the faculty in the department must be supportive of the arrangement, university administrators must be willing to make and sustain unconventional arrangements, and mutually acceptable expectations must be clearly specified. In our experience, it is rare that all four criteria are met.

Tenure part-time. Only some universities permit part-time positions to be tenured. Most land-grant universities,

for example, have responded to the need for flexible FTE arrangements for extension faculty and thus permit tenure-track and tenured part-time positions. Where fractional positions are eligible for tenure, a policy on benefits for part-time faculty positions also exists. In our case, OSU already had tenurable part-time positions, so our idea of splitting a position was not an impossible suggestion. At some other institutions where couples we know have suggested splitting a position, they have been told that doing so was impossible because the university had a policy precluding the awarding of tenure for any fractional appointments.

Faculty support. The importance of strong support by departmental colleagues for split or other fractional positions cannot be overemphasized. Any sort of unconventional arrangement usually needs a strong advocate, and splitting a position is no exception. When we applied to OSU, the chair of the search committee, Christopher J. Bayne, was pivotal in convincing the other faculty that splitting a position was a gamble they should take. It took extra persistence and vision on his part to encourage the faculty to think about and discuss something out of the ordinary. Once our appointments began, our departmental colleagues and a succession of departmental chairs continued to be supportive and to treat us as legitimate colleagues.

Administrative flexibility. OSU has been fortunate to have had two deans of the College of Science who stand out in their enlightened attitudes and approaches to facilitating arrangements that benefit women, dual-career couples, and the university. When we came to OSU, Robert Krauss expressed a totally different attitude toward splitting a position than had other deans with whom we had discussed the idea. He readily agreed to the arrangement and advised us thoughtfully, fairly, and well about contractual details, such as those dealing with promotion and tenure. Our current Dean of Science, Frederick H. Horne, a strong advocate of women in science, has encouraged and facilitated a number of other split and fractional appointments in the col-

lege. He also responded favorably to our departmental chair's and our request when, after ten years at 0.5 FTE each, we were ready to take on greater teaching and research responsibilities and work more than half-time.

Specified expectations. Key expectations must be specified and agreed upon by participants and administrators. These expectations include both the contributions of the individuals to the university (teaching, research, and service) and the university's commitment to the individuals (including salary and benefits) and the conditions and timetable for advancement. Our experience and that of other couples we know lead us to recommend specifying more fair and realistic expectations than we initially held.

Specifics of our split position

Promotion and tenure. Because each position in a split-position arrangement is independent of the other, separate decisions are made for each individual's raises, promotion, and tenure. We agreed to assume half the normal load and expected to be reviewed within the usual time frame. Each of us was reviewed annually and considered for any merit raises that were available each year based on our individual performances. Bruce was reviewed for each promotion earlier than Jane because he had been an assistant professor for a longer time before moving to OSU.

Each of us was promoted to associate professor with tenure and later to professor on a timetable that was average for full-time positions within our department. Our reviews for promotion to associate professor and for tenure were undoubtedly easier to conduct because we had each held full-time positions before working just part-time. Each of our reviews for promotion to (full) professor was based on the period of time that each of us was just half-time.

Evaluating research contributions for fractional positions is a challenge because the individual is expected to do half of the "usual" when the "usual" is not quantified. Nonetheless, the quality of the research, just like the quality of the teaching, advising, and service activities can be ascertained and evaluated.

Combining family, research, and teaching. Our split appointments allowed us not only more time, but greater flexibility in arranging our family and work schedules. Both time and flexibility are highly desirable in raising young children. We were able to spend much more time with our children than would have been the case otherwise. It was easier to breast-feed; to trade taking care of them; to assist in their classroom activities; to volunteer as soccer, baseball, and basketball coaches; and generally to share in the joys, frustrations, tribulations, and rewards of parenting.

This flexibility had the added bonus of allowing us to conduct field work at remote sites where the field season coincided with the academic year. We had begun research in Panama before coming to OSU and were able to spend three to six months per year there from 1977 through 1983. After our children were born, they accompanied us and benefited from exposure to a different culture. Our older son took his first trip to Panama when he was three weeks old and his last when he was four and a half, and he spent almost as much time during that period in Panama as in Oregon.

Our main field time was during the Panamanian dry season, during OSU's winter quarter. We typically spent most of winter quarter and part of summer quarter in Panama, then all of fall and spring quarters in Oregon. Our half-time teaching, advising, and university service activities were thus concentrated into two-thirds of the academic year, and our research activities were dispersed throughout the year.

Despite the fact that our teaching and committee assignments on paper were approximately half that of other research faculty in our department, we both worked considerably more than half-time, even correcting for the fact that many academic faculty routinely work 60-hour weeks. We both spent more time per course than we would have had we taught twice as much; we offered more graduate seminars, advised more undergraduate research projects, and spent more time with our graduate students than a half-time load should have entailed. We shared in the advising of our graduate students, initially to avoid penaliz-

ing them because each of us was less available than if we had been full-time. We have continued this arrangement because it has served our students well. The end result, however, was that each of us spent much more than half the normal advising time with most of our students.

Grants and finances. During the 12 years that we were part-time, we obtained grants to conduct research in Panama, Oregon, and China. Some of these grants included part-time salaries for each of us. Because salaries on grants were not predictably available, our income fluctuated. Our sabbatical year was particularly difficult from a financial standpoint. Neither of us had grant salaries, so we made do on 60% of two half-time salaries.

The availability of grant funds for research in our field decreased dramatically during the time we were part-time. We had (naively) assumed that the climate for funding would remain constant through time and that when we wanted to return to full-time work, we would be able to supplement our university salaries with grant salaries on a predictable basis. We learned that this strategy was not viable in the long term, and we decided that if we wished to be paid for working more than half-time, we should seek a more permanent solution. We therefore requested an increase in our appointments at OSU.

From part-time to full-time. After ten years at 0.5 FTE, our appointments were increased to 0.75 for two years, then to 1.0 FTE. In both cases, the Dean of Science increased the departmental FTE allotment to accomplish the transition. Horne indicated his strong support for both our original arrangement as well as its evolution. Our full-time appointments coincided with Jane's becoming department chair.

Problems we encountered. Many of the difficulties we experienced were anticipated. Living on two half salaries meant fiscal austerity. We worked much more than half-time. Other problems were unforeseen, sometimes frustrating, but also sometimes humorous. When OSU instituted a new policy whereby faculty were to use a specially designated major credit card

for travel expenses, Jane was denied the credit card because her salary was deemed insufficient. We were not eligible for certain university awards because they were earmarked for full-time faculty. We were amazed at the degree to which each of us was compared to the other. On the other hand, we did not experience the intense jealousy by departmental colleagues who might have interpreted our arrangement as unfair in allowing us more time to do research and publish. On the whole, the benefits of holding part-time positions greatly outweighed the drawbacks.

Improvements on the arrangement

After we arrived at OSU, another university sought to hire us and suggested a variation on our split position that they felt would be more fair. In recognition of the fact that half-time faculty do significantly more than half-time work, they suggested paying us three-quarter-time salaries but assigning us only half-time teaching and committee duties. Although we did not leave OSU, we suggested this model for subsequent split positions at OSU.

Two of the subsequent split positions in our college adopted this model and are considerably more realistic and more equitable arrangements. In these cases, each individual holds a 0.75 FTE position, is assigned half the usual teaching and committee load, and is reviewed within the normal time frame. As criteria for promotion and tenure, the faculty member is expected to have provided high-quality instruction and, although the number of publications may be fewer than for full time faculty, he or she is expected to have had a demonstrable impact on the research field.

Assessment

Overall, we have been very satisfied with how our split position worked. It allowed us to combine family with careers in a way that would not have been possible with other employment options. But was the arrangement good for our students, our research, the department, and the university?

We cannot evaluate these questions objectively but point to some possible indicators. Many of our un-

dergraduate students have chosen professions based on our courses and have excelled in their choices; our graduate students have been competitive for postdoctoral and faculty positions and are well established in their own right; our research contributions have been recognized by awards and citation-classic designations; and our overall efforts have been recognized by professional awards and invitations.

The College of Science at OSU has had three other split positions. The two other current split positions both began as 0.75 FTE appointments for each member of the couple. Our own department was willing to split a second position for another couple and later hire an individual on a fractional position. The willingness of both our department and our college to repeat and improve on our split position is strong testimony to their support of the arrangement.

Summary of the advantages, disadvantages, and challenges

For the couple. The advantages include flexibility; more time to spend on family or other non-job-related pursuits; and an opportunity to combine teaching, research, and family. Disadvantages include fiscal aspects; the difficulties associated with everyone comparing the duo; constant external pressure (usually unintended) to do more than the agreed-upon part-time work; the strong personal tendency to do much more than the agreed-upon part-time work; and possible jealousy on the part of some colleagues who assume you are at a competitive advantage in the research sphere because you teach less (an attitude held only by individuals who have never spent significant amounts of time around young children). The challenge to the couple is to avoid being exploited.

For the institution. The advantages include employing two individuals for the price of one or one and a half. Two individuals bring two different ways of thinking, two different backgrounds, two different approaches, multiple skills, and generally much greater richness of experience than would be possible with a single individual. An unappreciated advantage

is the possibility of attracting more women into science and into mainstream university positions. An additional but unexplored advantage might be that individuals who work only part-time while their children are young may be less apt to suffer professional burn-out.

The perceived main disadvantage of split positions to a university is the risk that only one individual of a couple will be favorably reviewed for tenure. However, this risk occurs independent of a split position; it is also encountered when both individuals of a couple hold full-time appointments, especially in the same department. A disadvantage of a split position may be that because it is different, the arrangement may be threatening to some colleagues.

The challenges to departments include figuring out how to secure an additional part-time position if each applicant should be appointed at 0.75 FTE and the original position was a single full-time line, how to evaluate research contributions when the individual is reviewed for promotion, and how to allot votes (or fractions thereof) in departmental governance. The department must have realistic and fair expectations for fractional appointments.

We assert that none of these disadvantages or challenges is sufficient reason to preclude splitting a position. We suggest that discussions of split or fractional positions focus on whether the benefits outweigh the risks, not solely on the disadvantages.

Fractional positions and women in science

Many universities have stated their desire to increase the number of women in tenure-line positions. Accomplishing this goal requires removing the impediments to the hiring and retention of women. Among the many impediments that exist, one that is within the purview of universities to change, has not received the attention it deserves and may play a significant role in contributing to the high attrition rates of women between undergraduate and graduate school and again between graduate school and faculty ranks. This impediment is the lack of viable options for combining family and career. We suggest that

options such as split positions or other fractional but mainstream positions have strong potential to remove this impediment and thus to increase the number of women in tenure-track academic appointments.

Our assessment is based on interactions we have had with undergraduate and graduate women around the country. We have heard many bright and talented undergraduate women say that they are not pursuing science as a profession because they do not wish to choose between having a family and a career. We have also heard female graduate students say the same thing: they wish to have families and do not see viable options for both spending time with their children and holding positions in high-powered research universities. Despite the fact that these women acknowledge that many faculty women do indeed juggle both, they often point to the full-time assistant-professor mothers they have observed and say they do not wish to go through what those women are experiencing.

The most difficult time in a faculty member's life is usually the time during which one is an assistant professor, struggling to teach courses that come up to one's ideals, to challenge and educate students, to establish one's own research program, to obtain funding, to publish, and generally to prove oneself. If this period coincides with having young children (which for biological reasons is often the case for women), the time can be even more difficult. Even if highly ambitious, driven women and men manage to juggle all of these demands, the messages they send to graduate students and undergraduates appear to frighten away many outstanding potential scientists. Moreover, if individuals wish to spend more time with their children than full-time positions allow, academia offers virtually no viable options.

Many dual-career couples do not want part-time appointments. For them, the challenges are locating good positions in close proximity and finding good child care. However, based on the dozens of inquiries we have had about our positions, many other couples may welcome viable part-time options.

If institutions are serious about encouraging women to pursue scientific

professions, they will seek to remove impediments to women's full participation in the profession. This task includes making it possible for a woman to juggle faculty positions and family. If universities are serious about facilitating women joining their faculties, if they wish to encourage young women to go into the sciences, and if they wish to employ more men and women who want to excel at teaching and research but not at the expense of being the kind of parents they wish to be, then they should explore ways of making it possible for individuals to work part time but in mainstream positions.

Recommendations

Split positions and other fractional, tenure-track positions provide underutilized vehicles for universities to attract more women to tenure-track positions and thereby to benefit from the contributions these women could make. We strongly urge universities to re-examine their tenure policies for part-time faculty and to increase the frequency and acceptability of fractional, tenure-track positions. These steps should be viewed as complementary to other, much-needed efforts to increase recruitment, hiring, and retention of women in science.

Nationwide, enough experiments like ours have now been conducted to provide an adequate basis for a comprehensive review and evaluation of employment arrangements for dual-career couples in academia. A recent survey of members of the Ecological Society of America by its Women and Minorities Committee (Goldberg and Sakai in press) provides a useful starting point. An analysis of the options, variations, conditions, advantages and disadvantages, successes, and failures would be timely and useful.

We strongly recommend that such a review be conducted. It could include a summary of the kinds, numbers, and fates of different arrangements for couples (shared, split, or separate positions); a review of institutional policies on tenuring part-time faculty; an evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of the different options; a comparison of criteria and timetables for promotion and tenure; a comparison of expected and delivered contributions to the institu-

tion; an assessment of the success of different options; and recommendations about these positions. A thorough assessment could assist couples and universities in making better decisions.

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