

Flexible University Faculty Positions

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The underlying difficulty that women have at senior level with science in universities and industries is structural. In the social climate of the times when the institutions were founded, women were not expected to have careers or to be interested in science at all. The philosophy and administration of universities is thus generally based on a male society. There are notable women who have been and are great scientists, but for the most part, they succeeded despite, and not because of, the system and by making personal sacrifice.

How can universities change so that women are more likely to consider a career in science? Proposals to set up positions in "Women's Studies" are not helpful to the advancement of women as a whole. Women are scientists, economists, doctors, philosophers, lawyers, etc. To suggest that there is a field of "Women's Studies" could be construed as an insult. Properly defined, Women's Studies encompasses every subject studied at the university.

One of the major problems facing women who wish to follow an academic career is how to combine that with a private life that includes bearing and raising children. This problem is likely to arise at about the time when a person would normally be starting in a regular faculty appointment. For women, this is also the time when they are likely to have, or to be contemplating having, children. A university faculty position is very demanding, particularly in the sciences. It is not a regular 9-5 job that can be left at the office as you go home. The multiple demands include teaching,

class preparation, marking and student advising, administration within the department, and then, if successful, increasingly on committees within the university and outside, fundraising and finally and critically, starting up a research program and writing research papers. Today, this typically means living the life of a workaholic. Not surprisingly, medicine or law look far more attractive as careers than academic science. Many women who have, however, continued in science to MSc or PhD or postdoctoral fellowship levels are deterred from continuing further by the clear perception of very heavy burdens ahead of them. However, and unfortunately, once a scientist stays out of research for a number of years it becomes increasingly difficult to return; the individual rapidly loses touch with the forefront of the discipline and skills are lost. Thus, re-entry after raising a family is not an easy option for women, any more than it is for men who, for whatever reason, leave the academic path for a few years and then try to return. The *curriculum vitae* and number of research papers published by such people would be "abnormal," lacking quantity, or "thin" relative to their age or to time since their PhD, and they could well be passed over in appointment or promotion in preference to someone who had followed a "regular" male career pattern. In addition, anyone who does not publish the "normal" quota of papers is unlikely to be successful in competitive research grant applications.

If universities were able to offer faculty members tenure-track, flexible, part-time positions, many of these problems could be alleviated. While women would be greatly assisted by the opportunity of taking a part-time faculty position and many would welcome it, it should be an option open to all and *should not be restricted to women*. Equity aside, this could be a legal issue of discrimination. Universities should amend their contracts with faculty so that flexible tenure-track, part-time faculty positions are an option for new faculty members, and preferably for existing faculty members also.

A number of factors are essential if part-time faculty appointments are offered:

1. All duties must be *pro rata*. A person with a half-time position would be required to do half the amount of teach-

ing, administration and research that would be expected from a full-time person. There *must be no* delegation of all the administration or teaching (particularly of large first-year classes) onto part-time faculty; they must not become glorified first-year lab instructors.

2. When someone with a part-time position is under consideration for tenure or promotion the requirements should be modified to be *pro rata*. Criteria could also be modified to take account of people who, for whatever reason, have not followed a "regular" career path.

3. A full-time faculty member should have the option of becoming part time and then later reverting to full time. If the reason for this request is child-care related, then approval should be given. Such applications could be handled as sabbatical leave is, with a long period of advance warning that an employee wished to become part time or to revert to full time. In this way, financial and logistical difficulties for the university could be minimized. With a significant number of part-time faculty the matter would simply become a part of normal budgeting across the university.

4. Permanent part-time positions could also be offered with the same *pro rata* restrictions already noted.

A few universities, including Cambridge, Exeter, Sheffield, York and Birkbeck College London in the United Kingdom, and universities in New Zealand offer flexibility to their faculty. I give as examples the Victoria University of Wellington and the University of Auckland in New Zealand. The status of women at their universities is very relevant as they have considerable experience of part-time faculty appointments. New Zealand was also a leader in the last century in granting votes to women (that came out of the Temperance movement); we should not ignore their policies.

The Victoria University of Wellington introduced part-time faculty appointments in the 1970s. A study made in 1975 suggested that more flexibility in staffing arrangements would assist women to pursue academic careers. In 1975, 14% of the faculty were women, the majority in the very lowest grades. At the Assistant Professor level, 12% were women. By 1990, after 15 years of part-time appointments, the distribution of the faculty had changed dramatically: of the total faculty 29% were women, a doubling since 1975, and at the Assi-

stant Professor level 47% were women, a four-fold increase (Table 1). In addition, and most importantly, the bulge in the distribution was moving up the promotion ladder into the most senior positions. For some recent vacancies, the university was prepared and able to negotiate any combination of full-time, part-time, or joint employment, or job-sharing with an outside agency that the applicants wished to propose. Such flexibility is greatly lacking in most universities.

The University of Auckland set up a committee in 1986 to review the status of academic women and then developed an Equal Opportunities Plan for 1991-93. In the decade prior to 1986, the percentage of women faculty rose by only 2.2%. This figure is much lower than the increase (from 14% to 22%) at the Victoria University of Wellington over the same decade. In 1986, 15% of Auckland's permanent faculty were women, the majority in the junior and temporary grades, as was the case in Wellington in 1975. Important proposals in the Equal Opportunities Plan include the following four:

1. Full-time faculty with child-rearing responsibilities should be able to request to change to part time, and later to revert to full time, for child-care reasons. Approval would normally be given.

2. The criteria of merit for promotion or appointment should consist of the capability to bring work to completion and publication. This definition of merit does not rely on the volume of publications, but on proven capability, and could go a long way to assessing the research production of those who have not followed a normal career path. Government funding agencies could also follow a scheme such as this instead of, or as well as, looking at the five or so most important publications.

3. Departments without women faculty should involve a woman from an allied department (or another suitable woman) at all levels of any appointments procedure.

4. In the short term, the university should establish a small pool of permanent positions, some at a professorial (*i.e.*, senior full professor in North America) level arising from retirements or resignations in departments where there is no longer a good case for replacement. Departments could then compete for these positions by putting forward meritorious women candidates.

This would be a very good way to bring women into the faculty at senior as well as at junior levels in the short term, and despite present budget problems, should be very seriously considered by North American universities. An in-

crease in the number of women faculty is urgently needed, and this would bring in senior as well as junior faculty fairly quickly.

Not many universities in the United Kingdom formally offer flexible faculty positions, and the situation as a whole is sufficiently serious that the government set up a national committee to examine the obstacles women face in science and technology and to recommend how the obstacles can be removed. The chair of the working group has commented: "We need to get women into science and then ensure that the barriers to promotion are removed. To do that we will have to change the culture, the way people think about things." Since 1990, the University of Cambridge has offered all its faculty the opportunity to work part time for child care reasons and then later to revert to full time. It is arousing considerable interest. I have recently moved from Canada to the University of London to a part-time faculty position. That has not caused administrative problems, nor any problems in allocation of teaching or administration within the department.

The first drawback to universities having some part-time faculty members is that people with part-time positions tend to work harder than those with full-

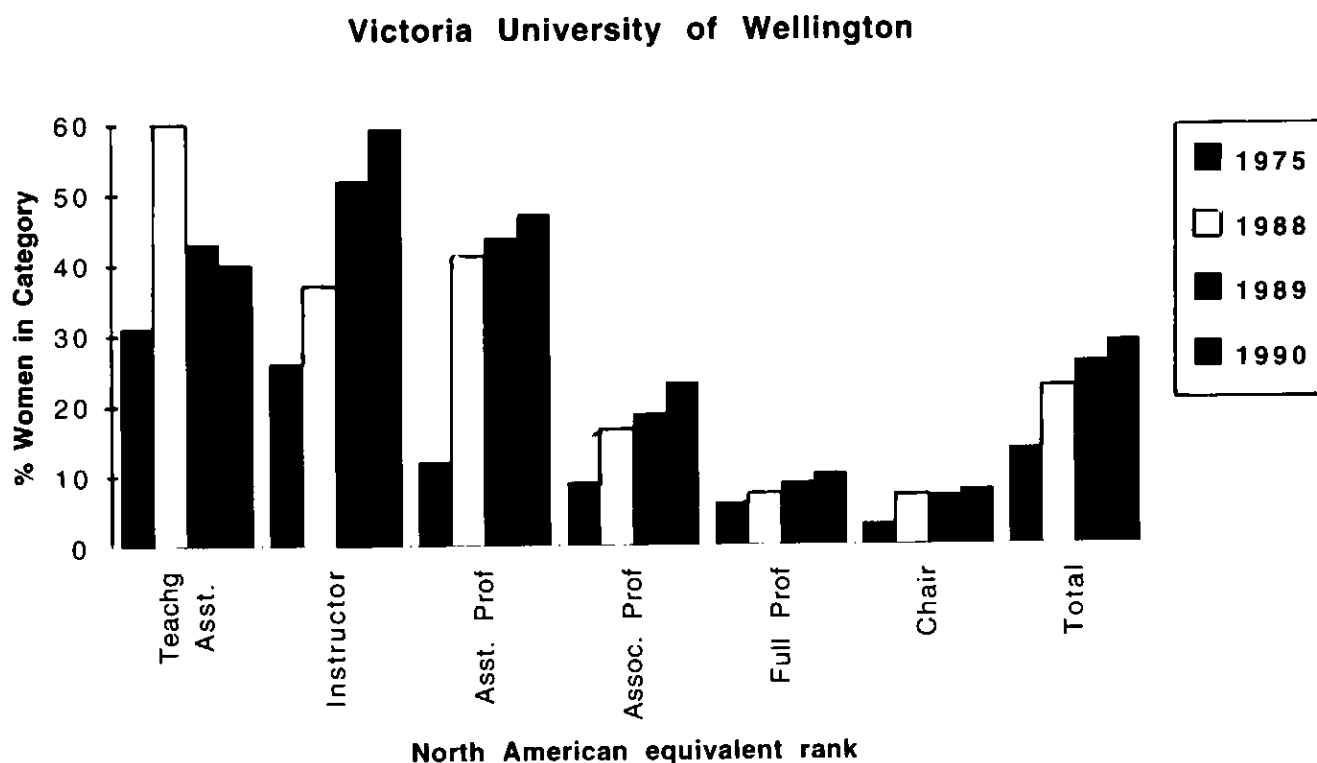


Table 1.

time positions. In informal discussions in Wellington, this was felt to be the only problem they had experienced in more than 15 years of part-time appointments. Some of the pressure to work harder than necessary may come from a desire to obtain tenure or to demonstrate ability. Some, however, is presumably just a matter of interest and enthusiasm in the subject, together with energy level. Someone working part time does not stop thinking when they leave their lab, and they may *pro-rata* be more efficient researchers. When part-time faculty make up only a small proportion of the total there will also be the additional pressure to prove that part time does not mean second rate. However, once part-time faculty appointments become an established option, this problem should diminish, if not disappear.

In the many discussions I have had, this proposal for flexible faculty positions has generally been greeted with enthusiasm by women and men alike. However, there are some men and women who naturally feel that they had to make their way through the system as it is now, and that requirements and standards should not be changed. There is also a justifiable worry by a few women academics that part time can mean second rate and that that is not good enough. Part-time appointments should, and can be, first class; careful monitoring will ensure that duties are allocated *pro-rata*, so that people do not become just glorified lab instructors and that good research is performed. Those women already in the system have ac-

cepted the system, or succeeded despite it, and have chosen to work full time. The proposal for part-time faculty positions is directed at the many able women who currently gain PhDs and then drop out. At present, the status quo is not addressing their needs. It is not that a faculty position is a prize for which they choose not to apply. Rather, our society cannot afford to discard their hard-won abilities, training and skills; we have a shortage of scientists and engineers. They are needed and the universities must look to change employment conditions so that they are encouraged to stay, to educate the coming generations, and to advance our scientific knowledge.

SUMMARY

Allowing full-time faculty members the option of becoming part time for child-care reasons, as well as offering permanent tenured part-time faculty positions would, in the long term, greatly increase the number of women in university faculty positions. In the present economic climate, a large increase in the number of women would not be brought about quickly. The increase will be slow and gradual as people realize that academic science is a possible career. In Wellington, the percentage of women doubled during 15 years of growth in total faculty numbers. In the short-term, a scheme such as that proposed by the University of Auckland to appoint women to senior as well as junior positions using funds freed by retirements or resignations should be very seriously con-

sidered. In all appointments, one of the most important considerations should be flexibility on the university's part, as in a recent case in Wellington where they were able and prepared to offer full-time, part-time or joint positions as the candidates requested. Such flexibility *must be clearly indicated in all advertisements* so that suitable candidates are encouraged to apply.

Finally, even the University of Cambridge, that bastion of traditional universities, now offers flexible part-time positions to all its faculty. Why are North American universities not doing the same? University structures are often slow, unwieldy and inflexible; however, change is essential and is long overdue. Along with a whole range of other changes to our educational system, flexibility in faculty appointments is needed so that our children and grandchildren will have true equal opportunity and our society will not continue to waste the resources of half the population.

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