



A HALF-TIME TENURE TRACK PROPOSAL

By Robert Drago and Joan Williams



Twenty-five years ago Arlie Hochschild argued in a book chapter entitled “Inside the Clockwork of Male Careers” that the tenure system at American universities was fundamentally flawed. Despite the increase of women in the lower rungs of the academic ladder, it would prove difficult, if not impossible, for women to achieve tenure because the childbearing years coincided with the tenure-track years.

In *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What To Do About It* (Oxford 1999), Joan Williams finds that Hochschild’s prediction has proved correct. Williams cites studies showing that, despite the increased numbers of women awarded PhDs, the percentage of women faculty has increased at a snail’s pace. In 1920, merely 26 percent of full-time faculty were women; that percentage climbed only five percentage points, to 31 percent, by 1995. Though women enter graduate programs in roughly equal proportions with men, they hold fewer than 15 percent of all tenured academic posts. Women are much less likely than men to receive tenure. Though wom-

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en's rate of tenure was the same in 1992 as it was in 1975, men's rate of tenure rose sharply over a similar time period, from 46 percent in 1975 to 72 percent in 1994-1995.

Why have women failed to rise in academics? Traditionally, in academics as elsewhere, we define the ideal professional worker as someone who works for 40 years with no career interruptions, taking no time off for childbearing or child-rearing.

When the professions were invented, women were largely excluded; they found it difficult to qualify for a professional career because they needed time off for childbearing. The marriage bars, which prevented married women from teaching in primary schools, came down during the early- to mid-1900s, allowing women to enter the teaching profession at that level.

More recently, progress has been limited because of the *de facto* requirement that academics take no time off for childbearing before achieving tenure.

Many institutions, however, have implemented policies providing for new-child leave. The three most common types of policies are parental leave, reduced workloads for new parents, and temporary stoppage of the tenure clock. Wesleyan University is considered a model with a universal policy of offering untenured parents either a semester off at two-thirds pay, or a reduced course load with full pay for the same time period. The tenure clock is stopped in either case.

Raising a child takes 20 years, not one semester. American women, who still do the vast majority of child care, will not achieve equality in academia so long as the ideal academic is defined as someone who takes no time off for child-rearing. With teaching, research, committee assignments, and other responsibilities, pre-tenure academics commonly work many hours of overtime. Defining job requirements in this way tends to eliminate virtually all mothers, so it is not surprising the percentage of tenured women in U.S. colleges and universities has climbed so slowly.

It is possible that delayed childbearing could resolve the problem. However, the numbers do not fit this strategy. As of 1995, the median age for receipt of a PhD was 34, placing the tenure year at age 40. Asking women to delay having children until such a late age seems unfair and unkind, and involves health and infertility risks. Fathers receive no such requests, nor do they face comparable dangers.

The tenure clock precludes gender equality in academics, as Hochschild showed 25 years ago. Hochschild suggested that universities

permit faculty to work part-time. We go further and argue that the solution is to redefine the ideal worker in academia, by offering proportional pay, benefits, and advancement for part-time work. This idea boils down to a part-time tenure track.

What is a half-time tenure track? Model language is provided at the end of this article, but the idea is simple. Any tenure-track faculty member with caregiving responsibilities for children, elderly or ill family members, or partners could, with sufficient notice, request that he or she be placed on half-time status for a period of from one to 12 years. Workload, including teaching, research, advising, and committee work, would also decline by one half. Benefits and advancement would be reduced proportionally during the period of half-time status, and the tenure clock would run at half-speed as well. An individual who went half-time for two years, for example, would receive seven years on the tenure clock instead of the usual six. A faculty member who continuously engaged in half-time work would be provided a maximum of 12 years until the tenure decision is mandatory. Given the financial penalty involved, we expect that most academics would use the part-time policy for between two and six years. Moreover, if a particular university believed that the maximum of 12 years prior to tenure were too long, the policy could be modified with a cap of nine or 10 years before the tenure decision would be mandatory.

The policy need not be strictly limited to caregivers. However, it should be limited to those faculty whose commitments, health, or personal circumstances limit their ability to spend time on academic responsibilities during the tenure-track years. Absent such a limitation, the policy would undermine the tenure system by permitting some faculty to accrue more time for research than others prior to the tenure decision.

Note that this type of policy would have a neutral budgetary impact. Assuming resulting cost-savings are returned directly to the affected department (as we propose), teaching coverage should remain unaffected. From the university perspective, the policy imposes no additional costs.

This type of policy would not solve every problem, but it would represent a major improvement over the choices currently available to parents who cannot work the long hours typically required pre-tenure. Currently, the percentage of part-timers at all colleges and university teachers is 42.5 percent. In no case that we are aware of has a PhD been hired with the expectation that a half-time workload

with the tenure clock slowed accordingly would be available if caregiving commitments arose. The vast majority of part-time appointments are off of the tenure track entirely. An academic appointment with no possibility of tenure strikes us as the ultimate “mommy track.” And it is. Women currently account for 36 percent of all full-timers, but nearly half of all part-timers (47 percent).

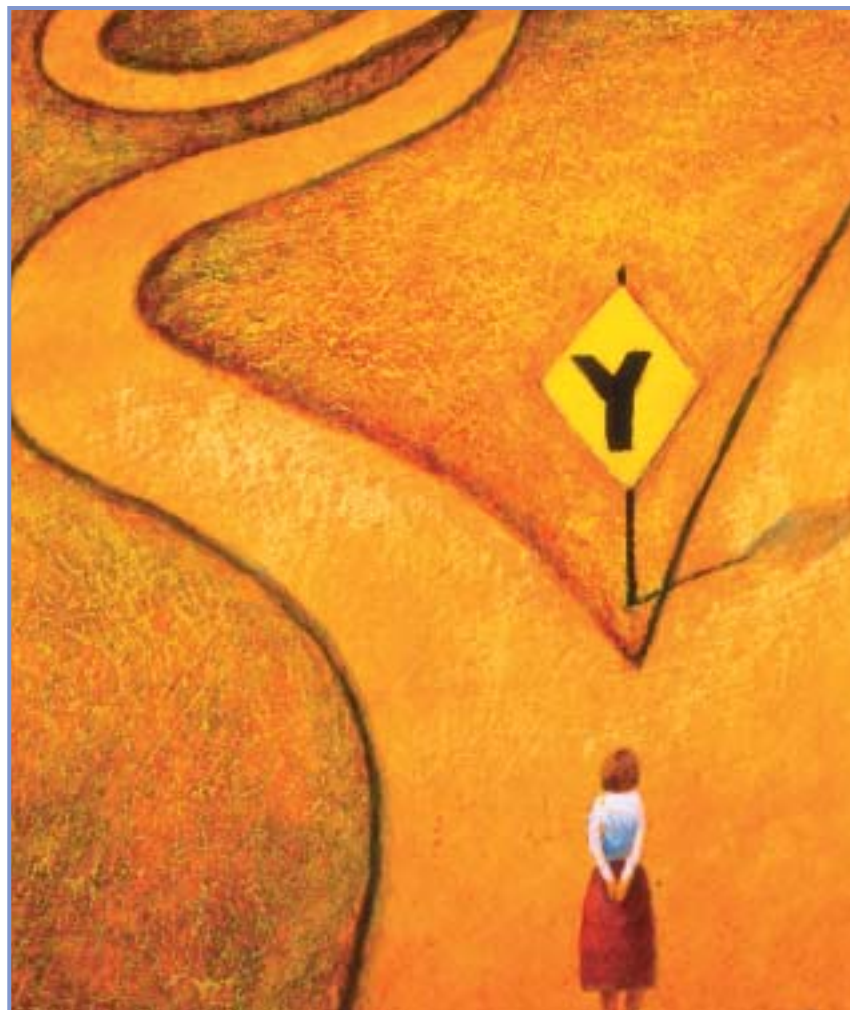
Is a part-time tenure track fair? Would individuals who use the policy avoid paying their dues and still achieve tenure? This proposal continues to require all pre-tenure professors to pay their dues—to pay, in fact, the same amount of dues. It just does not require that everyone pay his or her dues on the traditional schedule.

This is a change that offers benefits to men as well as women. The first benefit would be to eliminate under-the-table practices that offer child-rearing time at full pay to women but not to men under the guise of maternal disability pay. Treating children as an illness suffered by mothers (but not fathers) is unfair to those who cannot or choose not to contract the “disease.”

Children are better viewed as a commitment—a very long-term commitment for fathers as well as mothers. Recent surveys show that fathers are increasing their expectations and desire for time to spend actively parenting. Although mothers still do the bulk of child care, the household contributions of fathers have risen in recent decades. This shift in time expenditures is accompanied by a shift in the understanding of the role of fathers. Many fathers increasingly view nurturing as an integral part of being a father. The work hours expected of fathers often conflict with the family roles fathers envision, since more than one-third of fathers work 49 hours or more a week. One 1990 poll found that more than half the men surveyed said they would be willing to have their salaries cut by 25 percent if they could have more family or personal time. In another survey, 40 percent of fathers said they would quit their jobs if they could in order to spend more time with their children.

Fathers as well as mothers increasingly feel torn between the demands of home and of work. Why don't they just rebel and refuse to cede to employers demands?

At present, academics are offered only two alternatives: work long hours and (with luck) get tenure, or refuse to work those hours and take the consequences. Given the way our definitions of middle-class manhood are intertwined with job success, most men will feel they have little choice but to



work long hours if there are only two options. To paraphrase one early male feminist, we measure masculinity by the size of a paycheck, leaving most men with little room to refuse employer demands. As a result, in the typical American family, the father performs as an ideal worker and earns 70 percent of the family income, while mothers' workforce participation is often marginalized. Indeed, two-thirds of mothers aged 25 to 45 do not work full time all year. Many mothers try part-time work, but end up dropping out of the workforce altogether because of the low pay, lack of benefits and advancement, and other exploitative conditions presently associated with part-time work.

If families had the option of having both parents work reduced hours without the artificial penalties that now accompany part-time work, more families would choose to slow the career progress of both parents instead of having one spouse work time-and-a-half, while the other drops off the career path. This pattern would be beneficial to mothers because they would not have to sacrifice their careers, and face possible impoverishment if they divorce. It would benefit fathers because they



could be assured of steady career advancement without having to pay the price of missing their kids' childhoods.

A half-time tenure proposal would also benefit colleges and universities. Current practices artificially reduce the talent pool by eliminating a hefty percentage of qualified candidates (that is, most mothers) from reaching for or achieving tenure. Opening up the talent pool would improve the quality of our colleges and universities because the key measure of success would be the quality of the candidate—not his or her ability to work long hours. Further, there is an advantage for any college or university that implements the policies before others. Talented individuals who wish to be committed to both academics and nurturing children will be readily recruited by such institutions.

One concern with the policy is often raised as a critique of current parental leave policies. Anecdotal evidence suggests some fathers take parental leaves but do not use their time to care for young children; instead they use it to “get ahead of the game” by doing additional research and writing. Such abuses reflect the fact that current parental leave policies typically offer full pay for less work. The

same incentives would not arise as readily when the policy simply requires (proportionally) equal advancement for (proportionally) equal work. A part-time tenure track entails a strong financial penalty, in the form of the sacrifice of half the professorial salary. It would be the rare family that could afford to live on half of a pre-tenure academic salary. The financial penalty would be particularly acute because the policy states that someone on the half-time tenure track would receive proportional benefits. Typically, this would mean that the half-time worker would have to pay a higher premium to obtain full health coverage. For example, if a college typically covered 90 percent of health care premiums, the college contribution would drop to 45 percent, driving up the cost of health care substantially for the faculty member. (Even a half-time worker still has a full-time body!) Although we suggest in the model policy that faculty be given the option of shifting benefits monies to some extent—say, from retirement to health care coverage—the financial penalty for part-time work would remain severe. Therefore, even though some abuses of the half-time tenure track might occur, the incentives it creates are very different from those at work in current parental leave policies. The net effect of a part-time tenure track might well be to force a more equal division of market and family work where both spouses would likely need to generate income when one is receiving half pay. The net result might well be a family where each spouse earns closer to 50 percent of the family income, and does 50 percent of the caregiving and other family work.

The flip side of the financial incentives we propose is that many academics might not be able to afford to use the policy. Single parents, in particular, typically cannot survive on a half-time salary. Although we do not provide a complete response here, Williams argues in *Unbending Gender* that much of the poverty afflicting single parents could be reduced by changing divorce laws such that the work of caring for children was assigned a monetary value greater than the current level of zero.

An objection often raised in response to family-friendly policies in general is that they favor parents over other workers. Our initial response is that strict adherence to the idea of proportional work, pay, and benefits makes the system fair as the term is commonly understood. The system does not provide costly benefits to parents at the expense of non-parents. Further, our model policy also makes the half-time tenure track available to adults

who need time to care for elderly parents and for partners or other family members who are ill. The 1997 “National Study of the American Workforce” suggests that over 42 percent of adults employed or self-employed believe they will be responsible for caring for elderly relatives within the next five years, so this provision could prove very important. The policy also specifically requires that any course coverage needs that are created by requests for part-time leave are not to be covered by requiring other faculty members to teach course overloads. All of these provisions help ensure that the half-time tenure track is fair.

In short, the time has come to expand the choices people have in structuring academic careers. We should stop measuring commitment by the ability of an academic to have a spouse ready, willing, and able to shoulder the bulk of the child care during the most time-consuming years of child-rearing—when the children are young. The current system is bad for women and it is inconsistent with our ideals of gender equality. It is bad for men because it cuts them off from full participation in family life during the crucial period when their children are young. And it is bad for children, because children need time with their parents. A kid can’t grow up in a day care center, to paraphrase one young lawyer. It is time to remedy the problem Hochschild identified so long ago, and the model half-time tenure track policy provided here is one way to do it.

Model Half-Time Tenure Track Policy

1) Prior to the date by which faculty are required to notify their units of a request for leave without pay in any given year, any tenured or tenure-track professor may present a proposal to the department head requesting a half-time workload during the following academic or calendar year, and documenting the family commitments or personal circumstances requiring reduced time for academic duties. The leave shall be granted on a nondiscretionary basis using the same procedures and criteria employed to provide coverage for a faculty member during a sabbatical year or other leaves of absence commonly granted to its faculty. Coverage for courses ordinarily taught by the faculty member opting to use this policy shall not be met by having other tenured or tenure-track faculty teach overloads.

2) Faculty members who work half-time in a given year shall be paid one-half their annual salary, with the other half of the salary

returned to the affected department to cover resulting teaching needs.

3) During the period of half-time workload, the university will contribute one-half of the amount it would have contributed for retirement, health, and other benefits the faculty member would have received if he or she had remained full-time. The university may permit the individual to shift some benefits monies in order to make the option feasible (that is, from retirement to health insurance), so long as no additional benefits costs are incurred. Resulting cost savings will be returned to the affected department to cover teaching needs.

4) If the tenure decision is normally mandatory in the sixth year, one or two years of half-time employment would move the mandated year back to the seventh year. In the same six-year tenure track, half-time employment for either 11 or 12 years would be associated with a mandatory tenure decision in the twelfth year of employment.

5) When a faculty member shifts to a half-time schedule, the tenure clock shall run half as fast as it does for a faculty member who is working full-time, thus each two years worked half-time shall count as one year worked full-time.

6) Other than the change in years of service required before the tenure decision is mandatory, the academic and other standards required for the granting of tenure shall not differ from those applicable to faculty members on a full-time schedule.

7) It is expressly provided that requirements for publication, grants, service, and other factors considered towards tenure shall not be raised because the half-time tenure-track faculty member has taken longer to complete the tenure track. The same standards for tenure apply to faculty members who have worked the same number of years, basing that calculation on the amount of full-time-equivalent (FTE), rather than calendar years, served. In judging the faculty member’s eligibility for grants, fellowships, and similar programs, the faculty member’s seniority shall be measured based on FTE years in service, not calendar years in service.

8) Leave granted under this policy shall be used only where the faculty member has substantial care-giving commitments, like caring for children, elderly or ill family members and partners, regardless of sexual orientation. The half-time policy is not to be used for the purpose of gaining additional time on the tenure clock. In any request for leave under this policy, the faculty member must represent that the requested leave is necessary for care-giving purposes. □

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