RESEARCH

Pharmacy Practice Department Chairs' Perspectives on Part-Time Faculty Members

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Objective. To identify the benefits and consequences of having part-time faculty members in departments of pharmacy practice from the department chair's perspective.

Methods. A stratified purposive sample of 12 pharmacy practice department chairs was selected. Eleven telephone interviews were conducted. Two investigators independently read interview notes and categorized and enumerated responses to determine major themes using content analysis. The investigators jointly reviewed the data and came to consensus on major themes.

Results. Benefits of allowing full-time faculty members to reduce their position to part-time included faculty retention and improved individual faculty work/life balance. Consequences of allowing part-time faculty positions included the challenges of managing individual and departmental workloads, the risk of marginalizing part-time faculty members, and the challenges of promotion and tenure issues. All requests to switch to part-time status were faculty-driven and most were approved.

Conclusions. There are a variety of benefits and consequences of having part-time faculty in pharmacy practice departments from the chair's perspective. Clear faculty and departmental expectations of part-time faculty members need to be established to ensure optimal success of this working arrangement.

Keywords: faculty, part-time faculty, work-life balance

INTRODUCTION

American Academic reported in March 2010 that "...almost three-quarters of the people employed today to teach undergraduate courses in the nation's colleges and universities are not full-time permanent professors, but rather are instructors employed on a limited-term contract to teach anything from one course to a full course load."¹ The use of part-time faculty members in higher education has increased dramatically across all disciplines. Part-time and adjunct faculty members now represent almost 50% of faculty members teaching undergraduate courses in US colleges and universities, with this number increasing to 70% in community colleges.¹ Whether health professions education is experiencing the same phenomenon is unclear. Studies and commentaries published in the medical education literature have described attitudes of academic physicians and chairs toward part-time work² and the number of part-time faculty members in academic

surgery departments,³ and have called for a reexamination of part-time careers in academic medicine.⁴ Part-time faculty positions in medical education appear to be driven largely by individual faculty members' needs and desires rather than strategic planning by the department. Women faculty members who choose part-time work tend to do so for family and childcare reasons, while male faculty members who choose part-time work tend to do so later in their careers and for both personal and professional reasons.⁴ Given the increase in the number of female faculty members in medical education, there is an expectation that the number of part-time faculty members in medicine will increase in the future.

Pharmacy colleges and schools have traditionally been comprised of full-time faculty members. In academic year 1998-1999, 11% of all pharmacy faculty members were part-time.⁵ In 2010-2011, that percentage decreased slightly to 9%.⁶ The numbers suggest that pharmacy education is not yet mirroring the national trend of universities to hire more part-time faculty members. However, given the expansion in the number of colleges and schools of pharmacy nationwide,⁷ the documented shortage of pharmacy faculty members,⁸ and economic pressures, pharmacy

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colleges and schools may soon have to employ more part-time faculty members as has happened in other non-health professions disciplines.

The pharmacy literature includes descriptions of situations where part-time faculty members job share.⁹ There appears to be interest in part-time faculty positions, and like medical education, this interest is largely driven by the individual needs of the faculty members.

Given national trends and the interest of faculty members in reducing their full-time commitment in some health professions disciplines, we determined that there was a need to understand the nature of part-time faculty positions and the impact of part-time employment on the individual faculty member and the department. In pharmacy education, pharmacy practice is typically the largest department, and therefore our study focused on that department. The objective of this study was to describe the benefits and consequences of part-time faculty members in departments of pharmacy practice from the department chair's perspective.

METHODS

Qualitative methods were used in this study as the research focused on identifying the perceived benefits and consequences of having part-time faculty members rather than on determining why individuals or departments chose to hire part-time faculty members or switch full-time faculty members to part-time.¹⁰ Personal interviews were the data collection method. A stratified purposive sample of 12 chairs of pharmacy practice departments from US colleges and schools of pharmacy was selected from the total population of 102 department chairs. The sample represented public and private universities and a wide range of geographic areas (Southeast, Midwest, West Coast, and Northeast).

Interview questions were developed to obtain the following information: number of years in the position of department chair, department size, and prevalence of faculty requests to switch from full-time to part-time. The core of the interview was a discussion between the interviewer and the chair about the benefits and consequences of having part-time faculty members to the individual faculty member and to the department.

Chairs were first contacted via e-mail and asked to participate. Appointments were then made for the interviews, which were conducted in the summer and fall of 2010. The conversations were not recorded; rather the interviewers took extensive notes and summarized key points back to the interviewee for confirmation of understanding. All participants completed and submitted informed consent forms. This study was reviewed and approved by the Midwestern University Institutional Review Board.

Two investigators independently read interview notes and categorized and enumerated all responses to determine major themes. Content analysis methods were used to code the interview notes. Upon completion of the initial independent analysis, the investigators jointly reviewed the data and came to consensus on major themes.

RESULTS

Eleven of the 12 chairs who were invited agreed to participate in the study. The twelfth individual did not respond after repeated contact attempts. The 11 chairs were interviewed by 1 of the investigators, with each interview lasting from 20 minutes to 1 hour. The number of years that participants had served in the department chair position ranged from 1 to 23, with a mean of 6 years. The majority (8) of the chairs were male. One participant was serving as an associate dean at the time of the interview, but was able to respond to the questions based on his years of experience as pharmacy practice chair.

The first questions in the interview focused on describing the number and characteristics of part-time faculty members in the departments. Because the definition of part-time faculty member varies across institutions, for the purposes of the study, the interviewer defined part-time faculty members as those faculty members who were on the college or school's regular payroll, employed less than full-time, and not classified as preceptors or adjunct faculty members. Under this definition, a part-time faculty member could work as little as 1 day per week or as much as 4 days per week. Chairs reported that the number of part-time faculty members in their departments ranged from 0 to 10 and were primarily non-tenure track. One chair with 10 part-time faculty members noted that these individuals did not have voting rights and could be classified as adjunct faculty members (paid on a contractual basis). Two other chairs noted that their part-time faculty members had more administrative rather than clinical or teaching roles (for example, in experiential education or development), and one chair stated that part-time faculty members supported their teaching laboratories. Only 1 chair had tenured part-time faculty members. Table 1 describes the number and characteristics of these part-time faculty members.

Chairs were asked to consider the past 3 years and describe the number of formal requests that they had received from faculty members to switch from full-time to part-time status and the outcomes of those requests. Four of the 11 chairs reported that they had received from 1 to 3 formal requests. The majority of the faculty members who made these requests were female, and all described the reason for the request as family related. Out of the 9 requests, 6 were approved, 1 was withdrawn (the faculty

Table 1. Number and Characteristics of Part-Time Faculty Members Employed by Eleven Departments of Pharmacy Practice in US Colleges and Schools of Pharmacy^a

Respondent ^b	No. of Part-time Faculty	Characteristics
1	1	Nontenure track with administrative responsibilities
2	3	Nontenure track with laboratory teaching responsibilities
3	2	Nontenure track
4	2	1 nontenure track, 1 tenured with administrative responsibilities
5	10	Nontenure track, no voting rights, maybe adjunct
6	3	1 nontenure track, 2 tenured emeritus
7	5	Nontenure track
8	2	Nontenure track
9	0	
10	3	Tenured
11	1	Nontenure track

^a Data reported in interviews with department chairs.

^b For confidentiality reasons and to encourage candid responses, the names of the chairs interviewed and their colleges and schools were withheld.

member decided to remain full-time), and 2 were denied, in both cases resulting in the subsequent resignation of the faculty member. One of the faculty requests that was approved required a switch in work setting from a clinical practice in ambulatory care to a drug information service.

We also asked the number of informal discussions that had occurred between the chair and faculty members over the past 3 years regarding switching to part-time status that did not result in a formal request. Only 4 chairs reported that they had 1 to 3 informal discussions with faculty members about switching to part-time status. Interestingly, 2 chairs reported that the culture of the department is one in which full-time employment is expected, and faculty members know that part-time status cannot be accommodated due the nature of the job and the workload of the department.

Chairs were asked whether there were existing university and department policies to guide them and faculty members in making the switch from full-time to part-time employment. Five reported that there were no existing university policies, 5 reported they were unaware of any policies, and 1 reported that there were existing university policies. One chair noted that the faculty handbook provides little guidance for part-time faculty members. Chairs were also asked whether there were existing departmental

policies or whether they had developed policies on this issue. All chairs reported there were no existing departmental policies, so they had used university policies if available and existing promotion and tenure documents for guidance, and had considered requests for part-time faculty status on an individual, case-by-case basis. Some chairs noted that the specific characteristics of a full-time faculty member's position determine whether the position lends itself to being reconfigured as a part-time position and that these characteristics had to be taken into consideration. For example, faculty members in ambulatory care clinics may be better able to adjust their patient care responsibilities to 2-3 days per week rather than faculty members in acute care settings for whom daily patient care responsibilities are required.

Chairs were asked to consider what the benefits of working part-time were to the individual faculty members. The overwhelming theme that emerged from the data gathered was that part-time status would allow faculty members to achieve work/life balance. This included factors such as having more time with family, providing child care, dealing with personal health issues, and having more personal time. A second theme that emerged was that part-time status provided faculty members with flexibility. The need for flexibility could be part of achieving work/life balance, but could also reflect the individual's need/desire for time to pursue other professional or business interests.

Chairs were asked to consider what benefits part-time faculty members brought to the department. The major theme that emerged from the interviews was retention of outstanding faculty members. The majority of the chairs reported that by approving faculty requests to move to part-time status it allowed them to retain good faculty members within the department. A second theme that emerged was departmental flexibility. Part-time positions could provide the opportunity for departments to hire faculty members with expertise in specialty areas that may not warrant a full-time appointment. Reducing some full-time positions to part-time positions could also free up funds to use for other departmental priorities. One chair noted that allowing senior faculty members to move to part-time status allows the department to maintain continuity and recognize the individual's long-term commitment and contributions to the department. Senior part-time faculty members could also be assigned to committees that are charged with considering controversial issues. One other chair noted that in order for the department to see the benefits of part-time faculty members, clear expectations must be established up front.

Chairs were asked to discuss what they see as possible consequences to the individual faculty member when switching from a full-time to a part-time position. The first

of 4 major themes that emerged from the data revolved around workload. Several chairs commented that their part-time faculty members worked full-time but received part-time pay and benefits. A second theme was that expectations needed to be clearly established regarding workload, scholarship, teaching, and student supervision to avoid confusion and complications later. A third theme, which we described as the “marginalization” of part-time faculty members, was reflected in chairs’ concerns that part-time faculty members may not be perceived as “real” faculty members. The chairs commented that this perception might compromise communication with other faculty members and cause part-time faculty members to lose influence in the department. One chair noted that subtle biases against part-time faculty members could exist in the department and these individuals may be considered “second class citizens.” Part-time faculty members’ clinical service choices could be limited and they might have a more difficult time “keeping up” with advancements in the profession and maintaining their skills. The fourth major theme identified was career progression and revolved around respondents’ concerns that part-time faculty members may have difficulties in receiving promotions and attaining tenure. This concern is also related to the idea of setting clear expectations for faculty members who choose to work part-time. One chair noted that moving to part-time could be a “career killer.”

One of the major themes to emerge when chairs were asked to comment on the consequences of having part-time faculty members in the department was fairness. Chairs were concerned about “getting the work done.” This included classroom-based and experiential teaching, and achieving departmental goals for scholarship and committee service. Chairs were concerned about workload allocation and the impact of part-time faculty members on full-time faculty members in the department. While the part-time faculty member’s morale may increase due to the department’s willingness to be flexible, the overall morale of the department may suffer if there is the perception that other full-time faculty members are assigned extra responsibilities as a result of the change.

Concern over the budgetary impact of a faculty member switching to part-time was also noted by many chairs. Specifically, they were concerned that the department might lose the newly vacant portion of the full-time equivalent (FTE) position, or have difficulty finding a faculty member to assume the responsibilities of the remaining portion of the FTE position. One chair was concerned that university administration may see that part-time faculty members can be as productive as full-time faculty members and may require departments to consider more part-time appointments. The final theme that emerged when the

chairs were asked about consequences was career progression. Chairs were concerned about their ability to support part-time faculty members’ requests for promotion. When asked to look into the short-term future (2 to 3 years), the majority of chairs did not expect to hire any new part-time faculty members, with the exception of one chair who anticipated hiring a part-time faculty member rather than a full-time faculty member due to funding cuts.

DISCUSSION

This paper provides guidance to faculty members and chairs in considering faculty members’ requests to switch from full-time to part-time status and in hiring part-time faculty members. One chair commented “All junior faculty should hear this.” Clearly hiring part-time faculty members or switching full-time faculty members to part-time status could have a major impact on the department, other faculty members, and the individual’s career progression. The chairs overwhelmingly supported the idea of flexibility to accommodate outstanding faculty members; however, clear expectations needed to be established to manage workload, and to ensure that others in the department were not expected to and did not perceive that they had to pick up additional responsibilities. Chairs were also cognizant of the effect part-time faculty members could have on the overall morale of the department. Resentment toward the part-time faculty members could be mitigated by clear communication and transparent expectations.

The faculty handbook appeared to be the primary document that chairs relied on to assist them in making decisions. Some chairs reported having faculty unions that had more extensive rules regarding faculty work hours. These rules could potentially assist or hinder the chair and faculty members in devising creative work solutions that meet the needs of the department and the faculty member while fulfilling the mission of the college or school.

This study has some limitations. The chairs were asked how many years they have been in the position of chair, however, they were not asked how many years of experience they had in supervising part-time faculty members. Lack of experience in working with part-time faculty members could have mitigated the comments and responses of the chairs. We also did not collect any information on the size of the pharmacy student class, which also could have mitigated the results.

Based on the discussions with the chairs, we formulated several recommendations regarding part-time faculty positions within colleges and schools of pharmacy and pharmacy practice departments in particular. Clear expectations regarding the faculty member’s responsibilities as a part-time employee need to be established at the beginning of discussions regarding switching to part-time status.

This includes the department's expectations for the faculty member's classroom-based and experiential teaching, committee service, student advising, and meeting attendance. Once the expectations are established, the standards for annual performance evaluations and promotion and tenure decisions need to be set. Second, the culture of the department needs to be managed so that part-time faculty members are not marginalized. For example, departmental meetings should be scheduled so that part-time faculty members can attend and participate in decision making. They should be encouraged to participate in departmental retreats and social events, and the expectations and responsibilities of part-time faculty members need to be communicated and transparent. Chairs also need to be careful in assigning additional responsibilities to full-time faculty members as a result of changing a faculty member's work commitment to part-time. Other solutions such as hiring part-time faculty members to offset the workload need to be considered.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the benefits and consequences of having part-time faculty members from the pharmacy practice department chair's perspective. Changing the status of a full-time faculty member to part-time is a complex decision with potentially serious impact on the individual faculty member and the department; however, the chairs who were interviewed supported being flexible and open to this work solution as a means to retain and accommodate the needs of outstanding faculty members.

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