

Postdoc Academic Chat #9

Successful Strategies for Future Professors

Wednesday, June 13, 2018

Readings

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#1. I Survived Year 1 as a New Professor, and You Can, Too!

Posted in [Inside Baseball](#) by [Acclimatrix](#). [Acclimatrix](#) is an professor at a research university in the northeast. In addition to her science, she's passionate about diversity in academia and public outreach. When not in the field or the lab, she enjoys reading, trying the latest craft cocktails, being geeky, knitting, and exploring by land and water. She tweets at [@Acclimatrix](#). Tenure, She Wrote

As of last week, I have officially survived my first year as a tenure-track assistant professor! I'm sure there are a lot of you out there just getting started, too, and so I wanted to share some advice and reflections, while they're fresh (Year 2 is already upon me, and it's already a different animal!). I was told a lot of this before I started, myself, and it didn't really sink in until I lived it. Still, just having someone normalize your experience is so incredibly valuable, and so here's my own:

You won't get anything done in Year 1. This is actually not really true, but it feels like it. Everything takes much longer than you'll predict — getting your office set up, getting phones turned on, figuring out the email client and Payroll and the archaic student course software (or softwares!), [ordering equipment](#). There are meetings and orientations and everyone wants to invite you for coffee and to talk about collaborations and to invite you on committees. You'll basically find that you get to the summer break and all of your ambitious plans to publish (even if you have a teaching release!) and write grants and collect amazing data all went out the window, and you will very likely feel like a failure. Even if you were crazy productive just before you defended, you'll find that you're paying the price now,

and finding it harder to focus with so many new demands to your attention. But here's the thing: everything you've been doing, from the thinking to the planning to the figuring out what your space situation is, has value. It's part of the process. When you hit Year 2, it should all be settled.

What you can do about it: Be strategic about your time, and block off a day (or a half a day) that is sacrosanct. Put it on your calendar. Do not treat it as time for scheduling meetings—treat it as a meeting between you and your computer. Invest in some time management software like RescueTime. Get those last PhD and postdoc papers in the pipeline. Make it a goal to apply for a grant or two, even if you have startup funds. [Don't stay at work too long](#). I didn't figure any of this out until recently, and I'm trying it out for Year 2.

You're not just starting a new job; you're starting a new life. You've probably also just moved, so *life* takes a lot more time than it did when you had a smooth routine. You'll need to buy new things, get established at new doctors and dentists and find hair stylists and daycare providers and every other thing that takes way more time than you'll think, and you'll feel like every thing you do during business hours is taking away from work. You may be away from your partner if you've got a [two-body problem](#), or you may have a [one-body problem](#) and are trying to figure out dating in a new place, or you may have recently welcomed new family members.

What you can do about it: Block out dedicated time to work on Life Needs, including some time during business hours. If you put it on your calendar, you'll feel less guilty (if you're like me). Forgive yourself for taking time to be a human being with needs. Getting a house-keeping service, having your pet food delivered by mail, meal planning, or any number of other strategies can help you from feeling too overwhelmed. Figure out what you really hate doing, and see if there's a way to automate it. Listen to audiobooks to make chores more fun. Block out time for fun (happy hours, trivia nights) and exercise. Go to the happy hours and socials, even if you don't feel up to it. The relationships you forge are worth it.

You will over-prepare for teaching and still feel like you're not doing enough. You'll be developing one or more new classes, and often feel like you're just a step ahead of your students in terms of content. There will be equipment to order, space to figure out, vehicles to reserve, field trips to plan, and AV to work out, and you may not have nearly as much time as you'd like to work all that out. A common response to this controlled chaos seems to be to over-prepare lectures, because the thing we're most afraid of is (often) seeming incompetent or uneducated in front of our peers. With demands on our time and attention, teaching prep can feel validating — it's something concrete we've spent time and effort on, which means we feel like we're still in control of something even when all the other balls are dropping. The problem with this is that there are a lot of demands on our time, and teaching prep could, in theory, be infinite— it's never *really* done. And you need to get things done.

What you can do about it: Read the teaching section in [Advice for New Faculty Members](#) closely and carefully, and reread it periodically! Give yourself a fixed amount of time to prep lectures. Get comfortable saying “that's a great question! I'll give extra points on the exam to the first person who emails me the answer after class,” or “I don't know, but I'll get back to you next week” (and actually follow up). Ask your colleagues (including your new ones) for their syllabi and teaching materials. Don't try *everything* you want to experiment with in the first semester— make a list of things to tweak each time, though ideally

not all at once. Remember, you'll want your teaching evaluations to be a trajectory through time. Give yourself somewhere to go. □

Your university is really happy you're here, and they're invested in your success. Assuming there was nothing weird about your hire, you might be surprised at how friendly and helpful everyone is. Folks will stop by your office and check up on you. A common question seems to be “where are you living?” as it's a nice, neutral topic. Your department admins will go out of their way to make your transition smooth — I found the secretaries were especially solicitous, making sure I had office furniture and knew my way around. You'll be invited to a lot of new faculty events, formal and informal, and departmental welcome events, and to join teams and book clubs and journal clubs and informal lunches. People are just as excited about you as you are to start your position, but they'll also be checking up on you to make sure that you're doing okay during the transition, and aren't too stressed.

What you can do about it: Be gracious. Stop by with little thank-you gifts for administrators who helped you order thousands of dollars worth of equipment for your lab, or bring your grants office some cookies after they help you navigate your first grant. Have something ready to respond to the many iterations of “how are things going?” you'll get from faculty. I would always have a positive accomplishment in my mental back pocket. Instead of “Totally insane busy and freaking out!” you'll then be able to respond with “Great! I just had a small review paper accepted in the Journal of Early Career Accomplishments,” or “Fantastic! I just ordered some new microscopes, which is always exciting.”

There will be things you'll want to change. There will be many moments when, instead of feeling like you have no idea what you're doing, you instead feel like you're the only one who DOES know what they're doing. You've probably been raised in one or two academic settings, and you probably got used to how things were run. You might hate the new email client, have brilliant ideas for how to totally overhaul the graduate curriculum, or want to completely change the way the department seminar series is run.

What you can do about it: Make it a policy to say as little as possible during faculty meeting in your first year. Observe, learn, and figure out the lay of the land. Humility is a virtue, and nobody likes a person who comes in and starts telling everyone how they're doing everything wrong. This is something I wish I'd thought more about in my first year (I'm opinionated). There will be plenty of time to make changes, and they're more likely to actually happen when you're trusted, known, and have clout.

You will discover all the negative things about your department, town, and university that you didn't catch when you were interviewing. There will be factions within your department, or a dean nobody gets along with, or a teetotaling president who revoked all the campus liquor licenses. Your town may not be as big, interesting, diverse, politically compatible, urban/rural, or safe as you'd like, and you may not realize it until you moved. You may discover your building has mice, a faulty HVAC system, a mold problem, or that your gorgeous office is suddenly not your office anymore because of any number of reasons. You may discover a sexist blowhard department chair, a cranky colleague you share space with, or a socially awkward mentor. Your university may be outright renegeing on space or equipment promises, and you may find your research operations set back months to years. You may find yourself with double the teaching load you were promised. And you will

discover all of these things when you are at one of the most vulnerable points in your personal and professional lives.

What you can do about it: Find a both mentors and advocates. Mentors don't need to be formal, but they need to be someone who can give you trusted advice. Advocates have to be people in position to go to bat for you. Let them do the heavy lifting if there's something weird about renovations or a grouchy colleague. Document things and file them away if you need to for later (e.g., sexist colleague or promises about space). Be polite but firm about your needs for space, teaching loads, or funding. Learn to communicate that these are the things that will set you up for success (remind higher-ups, gently, that you are an investment). And, most importantly, network with your peers — especially another new person— because having someone to grab a beer and vent with is worth more than most things. Try not to be relentlessly negative— if you're in a new place, try new things. Open your heart to where you've landed, and give the place an honest try before deciding you hate it (you're not exactly the best judge right now, anyway). Realize that your emotions may change on a dime, and don't make any rash decisions: give yourself time to sleep on it. I wish you the very best of luck as you navigate Year 1. Everyone's experience will be a bit different, but one thing we all have in common is that we're navigating a million new things. You're not alone! Find people to share wisdom, happiness, and commiseration with, both at your university and in a safe outside space (e.g., Skype with a friend, start a pseudonymous Twitter account, write a guest post for us at Tenure, She Wrote). If you've got any pearls of wisdom to share, please feel free to do so in the comments!

(Edited to change the title, as some of our readers pointed out that this isn't tenure-track specific advice!)

#2. The 5 Characteristics of Successful New Faculty Members

Chronicle of Higher Education

By *Rob Jenkins* SEPTEMBER 14, 2009

No doubt all you brand-new faculty members at two-year colleges who read my August [column](#)—and probably most who didn't—have gotten off to a strong start in the classroom. After all, teaching is your strong suit. Now you're probably wondering, what about the rest of the job? How do I make the most of those 25 working hours a week (theoretically) that are not spent in front of a whiteboard?

The truth is, when it comes to getting your career off on the right foot, what you do outside the classroom is just as important as what you do inside it, if not more. Certainly you will be formally judged on your teaching, but you will also be judged, both formally and informally, on your performance as a department member and campus citizen. And those judgments will be more public and likelier to stick with you.

Based on my own experiences as a "newbie" (four times), as well as my observations as a department chairman and an academic dean, I've identified five characteristics of faculty members whose first few months set a positive tone for their entire careers:

Be humble. You might be surprised at how many new hires show up believing they're smarter than their colleagues, or thinking they already know more about how the institution ought to function than do people who have been there 20 years.

You should assume that, as a rookie, you know nothing about the culture of the institution or the way it runs, much less the way it ought to run. Spend the first few months watching and listening to the people around you, observing how they conduct themselves and how others respond to them. From that you will learn much about how to behave—and how not to.

Seek out an experienced faculty mentor, someone who's been at the college at least three or four years. Avoid members of the "old guard" who appear jaded, disillusioned, and burned out; you don't want their attitudes to rub off on you. Look for someone who knows the ropes but hasn't yet considered using them to hang himself/herself.

(Note: Your department chair may assign you a mentor, but if that relationship is unsatisfactory, feel free to seek out another one on your own. You may very well start with a mentor and end up with a friend.)

Be willing. I mean willing to do just about anything, within limits.

The list of tasks you will be asked to perform as a new hire is virtually endless, as your department head "volunteers" you for various unpleasant assignments (because asking you is less risky than asking someone with more seniority) and harried colleagues seek to shift some of their workload onto you. You will be expected to serve on departmental committees, represent the department on collegewide bodies, sponsor student organizations, judge contests; the list goes on.

Add to those chores the ones that everyone has, like grading exams and advising students, and the load can quickly become daunting.

That's why I say "within limits." It's important to be able to say no, especially when all of those other tasks begin to interfere with your primary responsibility of teaching, or leave you with no personal life. But it's equally important to say yes whenever possible, because, quite frankly, that's how you'll endear yourself to colleagues and administrators.

Occasionally I encounter new faculty members who refuse to do anything "extra," anything for which they aren't (in their minds) getting paid. They're determined not to be "exploited" by "the system."

The truth is, in a community-college setting, I don't even know what constitutes "extra." There's a lot to be done and sometimes no clear delineation between one's official duties and everything else. That's why we expect people to be willing to pitch in and do whatever it takes to serve, well, the system—meaning students, the department, and the institution. If you think that's exploitation, then I suggest you talk with doctors and lawyers about their first-year experiences on the job.

Be organized. That's the only way anyone can cope with the myriad tasks described above, plus teach five courses, while still maintaining some semblance of sanity.

Organization means, first of all, time management. I highly recommend using some sort of daily planner, whether print or electronic. Enter your classes and office hours first, then add other recurring commitments, such as regularly scheduled department or club meetings. Keep track of any new entries as well, including appointments with students, committee meetings, and campus events. Then you can see the gaps in your schedule and plan to use that time for things like grading papers, working on committee assignments, and eating.

Being organized also means keeping track of your paperwork. There's no profession quite like teaching when it comes to generating paper, much of which is vital to the job: class rolls, drop/add slips, course syllabi, tests, handouts. And nothing can be more frustrating, time-consuming, and potentially embarrassing than spending 10 or 15 minutes looking for that one piece of paper you need. So take time to set up a filing system that works well for you. Then follow it. Don't just throw your papers haphazardly across your desk the minute you walk into the office (unless, of course, that happens to be your system).

Be collegial. Be friendly, open to sharing ideas and materials, and willing to help out a colleague in need. Your collegiality must extend not just to other faculty members but also to everyone else on the campus, including librarians, admissions counselors, and custodians.

It's especially important for new faculty members to cultivate a good working relationship—even a friendship, if possible—with the one person who has the most influence over their immediate happiness. No, I'm not talking about the department chair. I mean the department secretary. In fact, that's probably the single best piece of advice I'll give in this column, because having to deal every day with a department secretary who doesn't like you is the definition of misery for a new faculty member.

And why wouldn't the department secretary like you? Perhaps because you disregarded my next and final admonition.

Be low-maintenance. No one enjoys being around people who are always needy, who always expect others to go out of their way but rarely reciprocate, whose lives are always fraught with some sort of drama. Yet a surprising number of new faculty members fit that profile. (Some not-so-new ones, too.)

Remember, while your colleagues might not mind helping you out occasionally, they probably won't like doing it regularly. Department chairs expect to provide a certain amount of mentoring, but they have better things to do than hold your hand for the next 10 months (or 10 years). And, trust me on this, department secretaries divide faculty members into two categories: those who are high-maintenance and those they like.

So make your own copies rather than just leave your handout on the secretary's desk. Don't go to your department chair with a problem you can solve yourself or with a little help from a friend or mentor. Do more favors than you ask for.

The reputation you forge during your first year, fair or not, will stay with you at least as long as you're at the college. Maybe longer. It's worth a little extra time and effort (maybe a lot extra) to make sure that reputation is a good one.

Rob Jenkins is an associate professor of English and director of the Writers Institute at Georgia Perimeter College. He writes occasionally for our community-college column. If you would like to write for our regular column on faculty and administrative careers at two-year colleges, or have a topic to propose, we would like to hear from you. Send your ideas to careers@chronicle.com.

#3. The Top Ten Things New Faculty Would Like to Hear from Colleagues

The posting below gives some excellent advice for beginning professors on how to balance work and family life. It is by Mary Deane Sorcinelli , University of Massachusetts, and is number 22 in a series of selected excerpts from the National Teaching and Learning Forum newsletter reproduced here as part of our "Shared Mission Partnership." NT&LF has a wealth of information on all aspects of teaching and learning. If you are not already a subscriber, you can check it out at [<http://www.ntlf.com/>] The on-line edition of the Forum--like the printed version - offers subscribers insight from colleagues eager to share new ways of helping students reach the highest levels of learning. National Teaching and Learning Forum Newsletter, March, 2004, Volume 11, Number 3, © Copyright 1996-2004. Published by James Rhem & Associates, Inc. (ISSN 1057-2880) All rights reserved worldwide. Reprinted with permission.

When we seasoned faculty look back at the early years of our careers in academia, what advice do we wish we had received as we started out? What issues do new faculty struggle with today and what kind of guidance might we offer them? More than a decade of research has identified three core, consistent and interwoven concerns that affect early career faculty as they navigate their way through the first years. New faculty want:

- * a more comprehensible tenure system,
- * a stronger sense of community, and
- * a balanced and integrated life.

Studies also show that senior colleagues and department chairs can play an important role in creating the kind of academic environment that supports the success of early career faculty (Rice, Sorcinelli & Austin, 2000; Sorcinelli, 2000).

As an antidote to the triple threat of evaluation, isolation, and overwork, I'd like to offer some advice drawn not only from research on what helps new faculty succeed, but also from my interactions with hundreds of new and early career faculty members, their mentors, and their chairs. The following are the top ten things I believe new faculty members would most like to hear from their chair (or senior colleagues) as they try to figure out how to live an academic life-that is, how to teach well, produce fruitful research, earn tenure, pay attention to a partner and children, lead an examined life, and make plans for the future.

Getting Started

1) Remember: you are great.

We hired you for a reason-you may think that you somehow faked your way in here, but my colleagues and I are pretty smart judges of quality. And, we hired you for success. We make a huge, up front effort to get talented young faculty and the goal is to have you succeed. Newcomers, with new energy and ideas, help us improve our department. You are rising stock, an investment in the future of the department and institution. Despite your greatness, however, you aren't expected to figure out everything about this department and institution on your own. Reach out to all of us in the department. Ask questions. Ask for help.

2) You don't have to be superman or woman tomorrow.

Or even next month. That superstar older professor who is an outstanding teacher, has built a daunting research program, and is president of his professional society did not get there in a year. I'm sure there are one or two new faculty members who may appear to manage it all in their first year, but in my experience, such an expectation is unrealistic. It takes new faculty two or three years to get established; so, pace yourself for the long run. Things will take off more quickly than you think.

You might start by setting goals for your first two or three years and reviewing them with me. You are entitled to your big dreams, but try to sort them into manageable goals -that you can actually accomplish-for yourself. Small successes are likely to motivate you more than struggling to meet an unattainable plan.

Tenure Truisms

3) Figure out what matters.

Every department and college differs in its expectations for research, teaching and service. And every department and college's requirements will be vague or contradictory at least sometimes. Here again, don't try to figure things out on your own. Talk to everyone. Talk to your department chair and to the dean, but remember that what we say may be constrained by pressures bearing on us at the moment. We'll probably be at the helm for some time, but you can't always guarantee the same administrators will be around when you go up for tenure. Talk to recently tenured faculty and talk to that respected, older, straight shooting professor who can give you solid, realistic advice. Talk with members of the personnel committee to find out what they think is necessary for a successful case. Better yet, along the way, try to sit on the department personnel committee so that you can measure the official version of how things happen against what happens in practice. Finally, make an appointment to meet with the department chair at least once a year- to review those manageable goals we talked about earlier as well as your teaching and research, your annual faculty report, and the tenure timetable.

4) Decide what doesn't matter.

Everyone works hard. But you're not going to help your career development if you are working hard on something that does not matter. For example, we all want and need you to be a good department and campus citizen. Here is where advice from older heads can help. Someone might relish your chairing the department space or website committee, but let's talk about how you can make the best investments in terms of citizenship in your early years. For example, it's okay to be a bit mercenary and serve in places that will be of some benefit to you. For example, being on undergraduate or graduate admissions may garner you excellent students with whom to work on projects. Being in charge of the departmental seminar series may help you establish relationships with important colleagues in your field. Invite them to

give a departmental seminar. Their input about your work will be valuable, and you will be expanding your network of colleagues beyond our campus. A positive, national reputation does not hurt in influencing local tenure decisions.

5) Teaching matters.

In your doctoral program, external funding, journal papers, and books may have been pretty much all that mattered. But teaching, especially a commitment to undergraduate students, increasingly matters a lot in most departments. We know that early career faculty find great satisfaction in being valued as a teacher and advisor by students. At the same time, they find it challenging to sustain satisfaction in teaching if it is ill-defined, poorly evaluated and undervalued.

We, your senior colleagues, are here to help you figure out where your teaching is going and why you are taking it there. You may get off to a great start but even if you falter you will improve over time. Someone in the teaching and learning center or your dean or your department chair can introduce you to teachers in and outside of our department who are committed to teaching and student learning. They have a range of skills and experiences worth tapping-for making lectures more effective, facilitating discussion, testing and assigning grades, and teaching with technology. And you can also sign up for consultation, seminars, grants and other offerings through the teaching and learning center on most campuses. Put simply, departments can't afford faculty who can't teach their way out of a paper bag. So instead, we subscribe to the "open-bag policy": we regard teaching as worthy, public, and always developing and evolving. We'll be talking about and assessing teaching and student learning all along the way with you.

6) Make a plan.

As you are figuring out 3, 4, and 5, make a plan. Consult with me (your department chair) about the priorities you set. As you pursue your plan, here are a few tips.

Play to your strengths. This may seem obvious, but it can get lost. Think about what you know, what you are comfortable with, and what you are ready to teach.

Cultivate a specialty that you enjoy and do well (e.g., large classes, junior year writing) as it will make your teaching more coherent and enjoyable. Just as you develop a "big picture" for your teaching, you also should develop a big picture for your research and service. Think about the kinds of questions you want to learn more about and are ready to explore in your research.

Trust that we hired you because we recognize and want to capitalize on your strengths. Do your thing well.

In a related vein, take a look at your department's planning documents. Think about how you fit into the scheme of things. How are you helping to define and complement the department's avowed teaching and research mission? How will your work help to enhance the department? Finally, try not to avoid or procrastinate on the important tasks in your plan-on the things that matter. You should remember though, every task and every handout does not have to be perfect. For some tasks, "good enough" is good enough.

Collegiality and Community

7) Think "mentors," plural.

Those who are older are sometimes wise and can give you realistic and solid advice on a lot of issues. I'll introduce you to one or two senior faculty members in the department who have volunteered to meet with you on an ongoing basis. Mentors inside the department can help you with issues of teaching and scholarship and also on how to read the culture-who's who, what visions people have. Again, I also encourage you to reach out to colleagues beyond the department. There might be someone in the college or at another institution who can provide some distance from our community, and give you a broader view of the discipline and academia. Your senior colleagues are ready to help, but they are as busy as you, so you may have to seek them out. Stop by our offices, e-mail us, make an appointment for coffee or lunch. You're not being pushy or needy. You're being smart.

8) Invite community.

It's the rare department that can unanimously achieve the ideal in relationship harmony. But most of us want more collegiality. If you share a sense of excitement about your teaching and scholarship, it will bring

colleagues to you who can contribute to your work. Invite us to attend one of your classes or to read a manuscript. Attend departmental colloquia and lectures; spend time in the faculty lounge. This is a place where we meet to share works in progress, to talk about our teaching and our students, and to socialize.

Almost everything you encounter, someone else has too. Track down our successful scholars and teachers and consult with them. And don't hide your own teaching and scholarship away. Tell us what you're doing. Reach outside of the department as well-for example, once again, to our teaching and learning center, our scholarly writing group for junior faculty, or our community-service learning initiatives. Of course, don't forget your own students. Be sure to invite their feedback-they just might be your best teachers.

The Balancing Act

9) Don't work on 15 things equally all at once.

Nothing will ever get done. The good news is that as a new faculty member, you'll probably get better at juggling multiple roles and tasks. The bad news is it remains a challenge throughout an academic career. Over the years, I've picked up a book or two on time management and thumb back through them at the start of every semester. You're welcome to borrow them. Something I did in my early career was to pick one thing that mattered out of all the responsibilities and tasks I'd outlined. I tried to make sure I was devoting at least a quarter of my time to that one thing and splitting the other three-fourths of my time among the 14 other things I had to do. Once that one thing went "out the door," be it developing a new course or writing a book chapter, I turned to the next thing that mattered, so there was always one project getting a good chunk of my time. It didn't always work, but it was helpful to hold as an ideal plan.

10) Have a life.

Take care of yourself and your life outside of work. Whether the fatigue is emotional or physical, work can be an effort when you are too tired to put on a public face, to smile and chat at the mailboxes, to stand in front of the classroom. So you must take care of yourself, "fill the tank," whatever that is to you-working out at the gym, seeing a show, jogging, getting away from

town for a weekend, playing with your kids or someone else's. If you are drained, you can't be imaginative in the ways your teaching and research require. If you take care of yourself, you'll have more time and energy to do what matters and you'll enjoy this job, despite all the pressures. An academic career reminds me of what Mark Twain once said of Richard Wagner's music: "It's better than it sounds." For most of us, an academic career is better than it sounds. For some of us, it remains the greatest job in the world.

Conclusion

My advice ends where it began, by focusing on the personal-on what newcomers, chairs, and senior colleagues can do to improve the quality of academic life as we now know it. There is no doubt from studies of new faculty that despite our best personal efforts, systemic problems remain that prevent faculty, departments, and institutions from being the best that they can be, especially in the pursuit of excellence in teaching and student learning. But proactive, individual actions can build hopes, dreams, and accomplishments. Re-envision your career and your future in higher education. What is a meaningful faculty career? What is meaningful faculty work to you? What will you need to give-and receive-to shape an academic life and workplace that matters?

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