

ACADEMIC CAREERS: FIRST YEAR AS A PROFESSOR

Transitioning from the student role to the professor role can be exciting yet challenging. Below are strategies for surviving and thriving during your first year as a professor and jumpstarting your tenured career in academia.

Before You Start a Position:

Apply to schools that are a good fit for you:

- Do you prefer to spend more time on teaching or research requirements?
- Would you prefer to teach primarily undergraduate or graduate students?
- What geographic location do you desire? Urban vs rural? Climate? Region of the country?
- What is known about institutions' reputations and practices related to promotion, tenure, family, etc?
- How do departments and faculty support new professors' efforts to achieve tenure?

Negotiate a package that will maximize your success:

- Reduced teaching load during first year – for example, fewer courses to teach and/or fewer new courses to prepare each term
- Money for research assistant
- Specialized research software, equipment, etc.
- Conference travel money – for regional, national, and international conferences

Understand the context

- City/state/regional culture
- History of the university and its relationship to the community
- Image the university projects to its students
- Institutional mission
- University organizational chart
- School and departmental hierarchies – What is showcased and rewarded?
- Rules and regulations – What are they? How easy is it to find out what they are?

Develop realistic expectations

- Realize that you will spend most of your first year learning rather than producing
- Be satisfied with yourself if you accomplish one new thing during your first year
- Understand that there will be things you like and dislike about any work environment
- Remember to keep things in perspective – feel confident in your competence because you successfully completed graduate school and obtained a faculty position

After You Start a Position:

Learn & use campus resources:

- New faculty orientation
- Family and childcare resources
- Faculty networks or support groups – sometimes based on gender, ethnicity, public service interests, stage in the tenure process, etc
- Teaching and learning centers that can assist you in your teaching
- Technology centers
- Grant writing assistance – workshops, information centers, consultants, etc
- Advising & mentoring workshops

Collect good information:

- Pretend you're an anthropologist – listen and watch for cues about expectations, norms, relational dynamics, etc
- Ask questions about unclear policies, requirements, resources, etc
- Conduct informational interviews with other relatively new faculty (in a variety of disciplines) and ask them to share their insights about surviving the first year and getting tenure
- As you learn your new department's history, operating procedures, and current goals, seek out information and perspectives from multiple colleagues
- Use your department chair as a source of information and as an advocate
- Look at the CVs of professors you admire and see what they had accomplished in terms of teaching, research, and service at certain milestones
- Ask a recently tenured professor if you can see his/her tenure review file

Reach out and take initiative:

- Join faculty social networks
- Seek out multiple mentors and advocates
- Join "new professional" groups in professional organizations
- Attend campus meetings and events so you can network with communities throughout the campus
- Volunteer preemptively so you can sit on committees that interest you
- Be strategic with your teaching – ask to teach classes that relate to your research or that will help you learn more about a topic that you need to learn

Be clear & planful:

- Understand the written requirements for tenure
- Ask colleagues about the unwritten requirements for tenure
- Develop a timeline for meeting requirements
- Periodically remind yourself why you are there and what you want to accomplish
- State your needs to others
- Review your progress quarterly or annually

Say "yes":

- Accept invitations to sit on panels
- Present at conferences
- Serve as an ad hoc journal reviewer
- Review conference presentation proposals
- Agree to sit on a few committees
- Mentor a few students

Say "no" (or in some cases "not yet"):

- Some things do not have to happen in your first year – let them wait
- Try to avoid summer teaching until you reach tenure
- Limit your committee membership (especially crucial for women & minorities)
- Limit your number of mentees and advisees

Analyze your work style:

- What time of day is best for writing & creativity?
- Do you prefer to work several "average" length days or a few long days?
- Do you want to do all of your work at school or take it elsewhere?
- Will you be available by email 24/7 or during "normal business hours"?
- Set rules for yourself in terms of hours, availability, email response time, etc.
- Do not feel bad about respecting your time and boundaries
- Distinguish between tasks that are important and urgent, important but not urgent, and others

Create a workable schedule:

- Teaching
- Reading/research
- Lab work/experiments
- Writing
- Official office hours
- Departmental meetings
- Email and other

Create a suitable work environment:

- Make your office &/or lab feel like you
- Consider closing your door when you want to focus on projects
- Have a way to block out distractions

Track your contributions:

- Think broadly about the many ways in which you are making a contribution
- Start an "Add to CV" list
- Create a box or folder of "artifacts" demonstrating your teaching, research, advising, committee work, campus involvement, professional association activity, awards, etc
- Update your CV quarterly
- Practice telling your story – describing why your work is important and how you are contributing at the student, department, university, and field level

Use self-care strategies:

- Sleep an adequate number of hours each night
- Exercise at least a couple of times a week
- Eat well – regularly and nutritiously
- Maintain or establish hobbies that provide rest or a change of pace from your work schedule
- Get out during the day to enjoy fresh air and sunshine
- Reward yourself for working hard and hitting milestones
- Realize that transitions are stressful and consume mental, emotional, and physical energy

Nurture relationships:

- Partners, spouses, parents, kids, extended relatives
- Friends from grad school AND friends outside academia
- Mentors – within university and elsewhere
- Therapists

Helpful Resources

- Barker, K. (2002). **At the helm: A laboratory navigator**. Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press.
- Bassett, R. H. (2005). **Parenting and professing: Balancing family work with an academic career**. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Bataille, G. M., & Brown, B. E. (2006). **Faculty career paths: Multiple routes to academic success and satisfaction**. American Council on Education.
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- Keller, S. L., & Smith, A. L. (2006). **Advice for new faculty teaching undergraduate science.** Journal of Chemical Education, 83 (3), 401-406.
- Lang, J. M. (2005). **Life on the tenure track: Lessons from the first year.** Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Lucas, C., & Murry, J. W. Jr. (2002). **New faculty: A practical guide for academic beginners.** NY: Palgrave.
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- Sawyer, R. M., Prichard, K. W., Hostetler, K. D. (2001). **The art and politics of college teaching: A practical guide for the beginning professor (2nd ed).** New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
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