

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

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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, upfront 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?

References

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