

## **Postdoc Academic Chat #5**

### **STARTING OUT RIGHT AS A PROFESSOR It's More Than Just Looking Out For #1**

**Readings  
7 May, 2010**

- 1. Quick Starters**
- 2. Twelve Suggestions for Optimizing Academic Careers Success**
- 3. The Top Ten Things New Faculty Would Like to Hear from Colleagues**

#### **1. Quick Starters**

Professor Robert Boice's, "Quick Starters," are those faculty who had excelled at teaching, research, publishing, and networking. Boice's full study appears in his book, *The New Faculty Member: Supporting and Fostering Professional Development*, by Robert Boice (Jossey-Bass, 1992).

JoAnn Moody, past vice president of the New England Board of Higher Education has also written about Boice's quick starters in her "Demystifying the Profession: Helping Junior Faculty Succeed," (New Haven Press, 1997). Below is what Moody says about Boice's quick starters and their aim for balance in personal and professional activities.

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Quick starters aim for balance. New faculty typically have three major tasks to perform: teaching, doing research and writing, and acting "collegial." Most people think collegial means serving with colleagues on departmental and campus communities, a necessary and at times large part of being a "good citizen" and doing campus and departmental service.

But collegial, according to Boice, Donald Jarvis, and others, must also mean building positive relationships with colleagues on one's own and other

departments, working up collaborative projects with colleagues next door or continents away, and expanding one's professional support system first begun perhaps in graduate school.

Balancing the functions of collaborative colleague, productive scholar, and effective teacher is extremely difficult, but quick starters work intensely on their coordination and timing. First, they pay close attention to how they organize their workweek; they make sure all three functions receive quality investment. No one function, such as research and writing, gets put on the back burner (unless research and writing are not viewed as essential for the professor, department, and / or campus). Quick starters try hard to prevent "negative spillover" of their professional duties into their family and private lives. Protection of their private personal space and commitments is very important. Rather than feeling overwhelmed and desperate, quick starters try to stay calm and work for balance, much like performing *tai chi*.

Balance is possible when one is striving for *competency* but probably never possible when one's hidden agenda is *perfection*. Striving for perfectionism can quickly cause an individual to become a frenetic workaholic and lose balance and perspective.

Quick starters in all disciplines say their real problem is not time management but task management. They learn they must limit the amount of time they spend on class preparation but they ALSO must limit the amount of time they spend on writing. They write in brief, non-fatiguing, daily sessions lasting about an hour, and the hardly ever write in the evenings and on weekends. They also devote about one hour each day to networking - such as phone calls, visits, e-mail - wherein they discuss, with colleagues near and far, their teaching, their writing and research projects and idea as well as map out plans for future projects with other scholars.

## **2. Twelve Suggestions for Optimizing Academic Careers Success**

The material below is taken from a chapter, "Lessons Learned Along the Way: Twelve Suggestions for Optimizing Career Success," by Arthur Bedeian, appearing in an excellent book, *Rhythms of Academic Life: Personal Accounts of Careers in Academia*, P.J. Frost and M. Susan Taylor, editors, SAGE Publications, 1996. [Available from Amazon.com, ISBN 0803972636, \$31.95]

The book deals primarily with issues in management and industrial engineering academic fields for faculty at Research universities, however, it has much good advice for all of us in higher education. Bedeian is a professor of management, and chairman, Department of Management, at Louisiana State University.

### **1. Hit The Ground Running**

"It has been frequently observed that developing a successful career is much like riding a train. Both require having your ticket punched along the way. Getting a quick start, [particularly with research and publications] or hitting the ground running can do much to ensure that the journey from assistant, to associate, to full-professor proceeds in a timely fashion, as one's ticket is properly punched at all the appropriate stations."

### **2. Locate The Best Predictor Of Future Performance**

"The pedigree of the institution from which you graduated may be helpful in obtaining a desired position, it is of little value in keeping such a position."

"Demonstrate independent scholarly ability and make sure you have publications that go well beyond your dissertation."

"A sustained level of performance is critical to success - the best predictor of future performance is past performance."

### **3. Location, Location, Location**

"If I were asked to name the most important factor in a successful career, my answer would unhesitatingly be locating with colleagues one can work with

- that is, having a critical mass of colleagues involved in researching, writing, and publishing."

#### 4. Publish, Publish, Publish

"In economic analogy, publications are the major currency of the realm...Publications means visibility, esteem, and career mobility."

#### 5. Be Proactive

"The aspiring scholar bent on a successful career must quickly appreciate that no individual has enough time to dispense effort endlessly to all comers without regard to the ultimate consequences. Given my previous emphasis on earning academic currency, my comments at this point are directed primarily at the individual's proactive management of workload so that he or she can transcend the immediate environment and establish a cosmopolitan role identity."

#### 6. Do Different Things

"Academics should do different things at different points in their careers."

"[Beginning faculty] need to provide early evidence of their teaching competence and scholarly abilities, both being prerequisites of promotion and tenure....Stay away from writing textbooks early on."

"Over time [faculty] are capable of making different contributions to the academic enterprise. ... Senior faculty are also more likely to be in a better position to divert time from their research to pursue research grants, accept administrative appointments, and become involved in such activities as faculty governance."

#### 7. Achieve Academic Credibility

" Those that go into administration should carry with them a measure of academic credibility. This is especially important because it avoids situations in which deans or department chairs demand that faculty members do things (e.g., conduct research, publish, secure grants) that the administrators have not done and perhaps could not do themselves."

#### 8. Take Quantum Leaps

"At least two moves are typically required to maximize a career. The first involves that all-important initial academic appointment; the second is the seemingly mandatory quantum leap to secure a named professorship or endowed chair. Why the second more often than not requires a move from one institution to another is a conundrum. A partial answer might involve a second observation: An individual's academic accomplishments are almost invariably honored more by others than by those at his or her own institution."

#### 9. Balance Work And Family

"In my salad days, I could routinely spend 14-16 hours a day locked in my study revising a textbook. The burnout that ultimately resulted, and the death of a well-known contemporary, actually found dead at his desk, occasioned a simple question: Did I want to spend the rest of my life writing textbooks? My answer was no.

#### 10. Continue Your Education

"Perhaps the smartest decision I have made in my entire career involved "going back to school." I enrolled in my first multivariate statistics course while I was a faculty member at Auburn. I spent a sabbatical taking a course in research design. To this day, I take methodological notes on every journal to which I subscribe....Be forewarned: When one submits to the temptation to jump from a research report's abstract to its conclusion, bypassing the methods section, it is time to go back to school."

#### 11. Become Involved In The Associations

"The career benefits of professional association involvement extend well beyond those provided by formal paper sessions. Interacting with other in one's discipline is not only a means of establishing a professional identity, but a way to find points of reference for one's career."

#### 12. Have Fun!

"Putting aside my earlier comment on the need for a strong work ethic, having fun (at work and play) requires that one not take one's career too seriously. There will always be conflicts and trade-offs. No matter how sharp one is, there is always someone sharper. And the more career success one enjoys, the harder it is to reach the next level of achievement. In the end, when that

last lecture is given and that last manuscript is in the mail, one must define career success for oneself, and one's own personal happiness. Good luck! Enjoy!"

### **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.

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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, 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?

### References

- \* Rice, R.E., Sorcinelli, M.D., Austin, A.E. 2000. *Heeding New Voices: Academic Careers for a New Generation*. Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education.
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Note: I gratefully acknowledge suggestions from Dennis Goeckel, Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, and Jung Yun, Department of English, University of Massachusetts Amherst.