Musings on a Career or Advice to Graduate Students

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What I want to do is reflect on lessons that I have learned in the nearly fifteen years since I graduated from Iowa State University. I have taught in three schools: a small two-year feeder school in Wisconsin (University of Wisconsin-Baraboo), a large land-grant school in North Dakota (North Dakota State University), and now a private liberal arts college in Florida (Rollins College). This has given me the opportunity to learn from a variety of experiences and to experiment with how to gain the most satisfaction and pleasure from my profession. I want to offer seven observations that may make your professional life easier.

1. Focus on teaching

Most institutions of higher education take teaching undergraduates seriously, but all have very different ideas of what makes an effective teacher. Schools that offer large classes tend to value lecturing and often the integration of technology in the classroom and in the educational experience outside the classroom, with blogging, BlackBoard assignments, and interactive units. Community colleges frequently require their teachers to teach the same introductory courses repeatedly, bringing a consistency of preparedness to a wide array of students of different ages, educational backgrounds, and home situations. Liberal arts colleges, with their small class sizes and exorbitant

costs, value student/faculty interaction and active learning, which can be pretty scary for those of us coming from large research institutions.

For example, in a recent discussion of pedagogy with some colleagues I learned that a fifty-some year old political science professor never talks first in any of her classes. She randomly calls on individual students and they have to be prepared to talk for three minutes on any aspect of the assigned reading. This technique, while engaging students, often thrusts the class in unexpected directions requiring more preparation on the part of the professor and a degree of flexibility in terms of learning expectations and outcomes that is rare in larger universities.

It is hard to learn an institution's teaching philosophy, especially when you are frantically preparing new classes and trying to revise your dissertation for publication, but it is important. Eventually, your teaching will be judged by your department and also by the wider college. Listen to the buzz about teaching at the college, how do people talk about what goes on the classroom? Does the school host regular pedagogical discussions or lunches that you can attend? If so, try to attend these. What is going on in other instructor's classrooms when you pass them? What do your colleagues' syllabi look like? What do students tell you about other classes (you can generally ignore comments like "but no-one else expects us to do homework," or "we always can use our books in tests in other classes."

2. All students are not created equal

Although it should be fairly self-evident, I have been very surprised at how the character of student bodies differs from institution to institution and also how the faculty approach to students differs. To be an effective teacher it is important to learn what

your college's students are like as quickly as possible. What are their strengths and weaknesses? You might find that your school has a high percentage of adult or non-traditional students. These students tend to be highly motivated and very interested in learning. They have to be. Going to school while raising a family and/or holding down a job is extremely challenging. Many non-traditional students will not make it. School is just too hard, and they have too many other priorities. Others will do very well. Non-traditional students generally require less help than traditional ones, but you may find it hard to meet their needs. In addition, since this is such a challenge to them, they expect the best from you. Indeed, they are liable to let you know if they think you are falling short of their expectations. Given their time constraints, you will need to be flexible about your office hours, and you might need to determine what your policy is about children in class or phones for people on call.

At North Dakota State University we had a large number of first-generation college students. The drop-out rate for such students is very high. They usually have little at-home preparation for college. They may lack experience with libraries, they need help understanding and applying for grants and financial aid, and, if they want to go on to graduate school, you may be asked for assistance in the application process, to explain expectations, and even to outline what is involved in a graduate degree and the potential outcomes for their parents.

Even regular students vary considerably. At Rollins, the students tend to be brighter than average, but extremely lazy. They will absolutely not do assignments or readings unless there is a negative consequence. They are also needy. One of my advisees comes by every day for a hug. They want to know their professors and have

their professors know them—a far cry from NDSU where students would resort to odd neck contortions to avoid meeting your eye if they ran into you on campus!

Along with different types of students, different campuses expect varying degrees and types of student/faculty interaction. At Rollins we are encouraged to travel with students, research with students, and, to a certain degree, socialize with students. This was not the case at other schools I taught at, where familiarity was discouraged as potentially undermining the classroom environment.

3. Find a mentor

You can get a lot of insight into how an institution approaches teaching and students from your mentor. Many institutions have formal mentor programs, although often they are fairly ineffective and do not follow the proscribed wisdom on mentoring. When I arrived at Rollins, for example, another new, male faculty member and I were assigned a pair of mentors. What this involved was one lunch in the campus dining center late in the first semester and no follow-up; nice, but not very helpful.

Research has shown that the best mentor/mentee relationships are between people of the same sex in different, but similar disciplines. The interaction should be structured; this is not an instant friend, but someone to help guide you through your first few years. It is a good idea to determine expectations, a meeting schedule, and goals early on. Your mentor should aid you in the creation of a tenure plan, point you in the direction of campus resources—funds for research, granting opportunities, teaching workshops—give you some perspective of the place of your department in the broader institution (more on that later), and help you navigate the college's idiosyncratic bureaucratic hurdles.

If your new home doesn't have a mentoring program or has a poor one, you need to create your own. Seek out someone who is willing to help you. Ask the dean, the department chair, and other untenured faculty, who they would recommend. You are looking for someone energetic and well respected, whose career you would like to emulate. This is entirely possible. For the last three years, I have been mentoring a young scholar at her request. We meet weekly and talk about the challenges she faces in the classroom and her department, her academic successes, and plans for the future. We have become fast friends, but that was never the aim of the exercise.

4. Get Involved.

Your mentor should not be your only contact outside your department. The more people you know in all areas of the college, the easier your life will be. It is a good idea to volunteer with a group that has wide campus involvement. At NDSU I took their leadership course, which involved a four-hour class weekly for a semester. Everyone else taking the class was staff, and so I got to know people in parking, IT, dining services, etc. who all helped make my life much smoother. At Rollins I have served for three years on the Diversity Council, a mixed group of staff, faculty, and students. The connections that I made on the council helped immeasurably last year when Rollins hosted the Agricultural History conference. When an eighty-some year old historian was found wandering around campus in the middle of the night, the security guy knew he belonged to me and also knew my home number—actually, cancel this, maybe being anonymous is the way to go!

One of the big advantages about creating a wide network of acquaintances is getting a different perspective on your department. Departments have their own

culture, their own lore, and their own history, none of which has to be either accurate or shared with the institution at large. It is always a good idea to gain an understanding of how the college, in general, views your department and departmental colleagues. When I started at Rollins, I asked my department colleagues who the problem faculty members were. They mentioned several people, and I was careful to treat them with kid gloves. It wasn't until later in the semester that my diversity council colleagues pointed out that my department chair was viewed generally as one of the most problematic faculty members on campus! Knowing this has not changed my attitude toward the chair—he is a dear friend—but it has helped me position myself and my department in ways to offset his reputation.

5. Know your cohorts

One group that it is important to cultivate from the beginning is your entering cohort. Colleges usually offer elaborate orientation weeks for new faculty that involve everything from sexual harassment training to benefit information to teaching workshops. Despite the number of lectures you still have to write and the classes you have to organize and the unpacking you need to do, attend all these meetings. The other members of your incoming class will provide instant contacts around the university and a potential friend pool. Equally, they will be your peers as you move through midcourse review, promotion and tenure, and beyond. It will be very useful to know how these people proceed; they will provide a checks and balance system for you.

Coming in as a one-year appointment, I did not go through orientation at NDSU, and I regret it. My experience at Rollins was great. We spent basically a whole week together, bonding over TIAA-CREF decisions and watching a shuttle launch at the

Dean's house. There were twenty-six new faculty, a record year, and many of us are still close. All the new women drank together every Friday for at least a year, and still gather once a semester. I team-taught with a new colleague in Political Science and have served on a number of committees with others of my incoming class.

6. Get involved, or not....

New faculty will undoubtedly receive much conflicting and usually unsolicited advice on their level of involvement in campus and department business. Some colleagues will make the argument that it is "too dangerous" for untenured people to offer opinions because they might upset important people who will then work against them, resulting in them being denied tenure and unemployed. Other colleagues will say the opposite: that if untenured people do not offer opinions they will be seen as weak and uninterested by important people who will then work against them, resulting in them being denied tenure and unemployed.

There seems to be a similar divide on the issue of service. All professors are required to do service for promotion and tenure—it is the third leg of the stool—but how much and in what form remains hotly debated. Should you volunteer for an important committee that will put you in the spotlight? If you do, and your committee introduces controversial new legislation, will it jeopardize your career? Or should you focus on teaching and research, keep your head down, and not say boo to a goose? This will not upset anyone, but it does not allow you to flesh out the service requirement on your resume.

Ultimately, what you have to do is carve a middle road. Watch and listen and see how other untenured people act. Do they talk in meetings? If so, what meetings:

departmental or wider all-college meetings? Do they serve on committees? If so, do they actively participate or just rubber-stamp their colleagues' work? This is a question where I think you should be guided by the actions of your peers rather than the advice of tenured people who might be trying to alter the status quo with you as the vehicle of change.

I do not believe that most academics would hold an opinion against another faculty member, but it does happen. At the same time, not speaking up and refraining from getting involved has its own downside, leaving you feeling uncommitted to the institution and undervalued, if not intimidated. My advice would be to invest your time and energy in committees that have a minimal workload and are non-controversial. These often are committees dealing with student life. Avoid anything to do with promotion and tenure criteria or curricula changes; these topics are rife with controversy and most faculty members will passionately defend their opinions. Any change in these is often seen as a step onto a slippery slope.

Last year I chaired the Professional Standards Committee and we wanted to add a description of how a sabbatical could be used to the bylaws. The description we chose was one that is already in the college handbook. The change seemed fairly innocuous and easily passed through the Executive Committee. When I presented the change to the faculty for approval, the outcry was horrendous. Otherwise smart people publically voiced the opinion that this was an attempt to get rid of tenure altogether, and of course, being the one standing at the podium, I was clearly the one who was trying to do this. Now I have tenure and my colleagues are generally kinder and more intelligent than they demonstrated in that meeting so I'm sure this is just a tempest in a teapot, but I would recommend that you NOT put yourself at that podium!

7. Understand tenure

Thinking about that, tenure is a peculiar thing. It gives academics the security to embark on lengthy, potentially unsuccessful, research projects, to speak unpopular truths in the classroom, and to act as intellectual leaders in their communities. Tenure also makes people virtually impossible to evaluate after they gain it. Without any possible penalties, the logic for evaluation evaporates. This does open the possibility of people abusing tenure, not teaching effectively, ceasing to research, not engaging in the business of the college or department. We all know people who have used tenure basically to receive a paycheck for minimal work, but they are fairly rare and are certainly not worth eliminating or restricting tenure.

Tenure does have another interesting characteristic; it makes changing jobs challenging. We all know how difficult it is for faculty to get their first job, and getting a second, especially with tenure, is even harder. Only lucky and/or highly productive people will be able to make that leap. Consequently, the composition of a faculty, particularly its associate and full professors tends to be rather stable, much more so than in many other professions. This means that you will live with these people for a very long time and that, if you develop antagonistic relationships, you may find yourself in a permanent unpleasant work environment.

There are several ways to avoid this. First, don’t take on other people’s grudges. When I arrived at NDSU, my department told me that a faculty member in anthropology was a bad person, who hated the history department and was willing to do anything to undermine our faculty. For years I avoided this scholar, did not recommend students to his classes, and tried not to serve on committees with him. Ultimately, of course, it

turned out that he was a fine person who had just happened to have a rather public spat with one of the history department's full professors before I arrived. The history department closed ranks and I therefore inherited this conflict. I had had a similar experience during my graduate days at ISU, where I was cautioned to avoid a certain professor because he would purposefully try to undermine my career, only to find out a decade later that he is a generous and loyal friend and colleague.

Moving to Rollins, I used a new tactic. While I still listen to people's opinions, I don't adopt them, however close we are. I try to not personalize issues, even those that I am passionate about. This has put me in a new and exciting place. No longer am I part of a clique with defined friends and allies. Rather I forge alliances across the college based on specific questions and concerns, and these alliances do not mirror my friendships. Indeed, this year I have opposed one of my dearest friends on several controversial issues. This necessitates a lot of honesty and respect, but ultimately creates a more livable work environment for the long haul.