

## **It's a Wonderful Life**

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The glamorous life of an assistant professor is not terribly dissimilar to the glamorous life of a graduate student, but there have been a few surprises along the way. I have found some important differences between being in training and being on faculty. I expected many of these differences, but some have caught me by surprise.

I completed my PhD at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, a hard-hitting research-focused institution with 28,000 undergraduate and 10,000 graduate students. My clinical internship at the San Francisco Veterans Affairs Medical Center took me in the opposite direction, with complete immersion in clinical work. My post-doctoral fellowship in the Trauma and Anxiety Disorders Clinic at Central Michigan University felt like the beginning of a balanced diet of research, teaching, and clinical work at a medium-sized institution with 17,000 undergraduates and 2,000 graduate students. I am currently in my first faculty position as an assistant professor at Auburn University, which the Carnegie Foundation ranks a Doctoral/Research Extensive institution. With some 20,000 undergraduates and 3,000 graduate students in the university and a department that values research, teaching, and clinical work, Auburn afforded me a good balance between the research and clinical extremes I encountered throughout my training. My Auburn contract divides my time into 50% teaching, 45% research, and 5% service. It sounds fairly straight forward, right? Well, not always. I will tell you about some of the surprises I have encountered.

### **Pleasant Surprises**

There have been delightful surprises in the transition from trainee (graduate student, intern, post-doc) to faculty member. One unanticipated aspect of becoming a faculty member has been the amount of respect, encouragement, and general positive reinforcement I have

received from colleagues, administrators, and students. When you are in training, you spend a lot of time being corrected, critiqued, criticized, scolded, edited, evaluated, examined, assessed, analyzed, appraised, and judged. It is all in the name of improving and developing you—making you the best that you can be. All that improving, and the seemingly endless negative feedback that tends to go along with it, can be more than a little discouraging, especially when you are breaking your back and breaking the bank to try to get over the many hurdles and hills necessary to earn a degree.

Don't get me wrong, my graduate school mentors were supportive and encouraging and had my best interests at heart. Nonetheless, constantly being pushed to grow and improve could be painful. As a faculty member, I have been pleasantly surprised that no one seems terribly bent on examining or perfecting me. It may sound subtle or unimportant, but it is neither. When I started interviewing for faculty positions I was taken seriously and viewed as a professional and an equal by the faculty. Now, colleagues cock their heads and listen attentively to my thoughts and ideas. It is assumed that I know what I am talking about—I am rarely questioned. Administrators and colleagues seem to trust my judgment and try to be helpful and accommodating when I have a problem or request. In fact, in the classroom many students appear to take what I say as the “Truth”—a scary thought and a stance I try to discourage. Before you imagine my ego ballooning out of control, let me reassure you that it hasn't gone to my head. Journal reviewers have a way of seeing that you don't get an inflated sense of your own brilliance. It is easy, however, to feel a growing sense of competence and confidence when others are respectful, attentive, and courteous.

Another fairly surprising outcome of the trainee to faculty member transition is that most aspects of my job are fun. Teaching, research, clinical work, supervision—I enjoy them all immensely! Maybe my enjoyment is an outgrowth of the hazing process of graduate school and the insufficient justification effect. Regardless of the cause, now that I am freely choosing my activities rather than completing them to fulfill PhD requirements, I have renewed enthusiasm and joy in them. I have had the luxury of hand-picking my graduate

students and I value each of them. They are bright, quick, thoughtful, hard-working, and fun. If you were to stand outside my door during research meetings, nearly as much laughing as serious scholarly discussion and debate might be overheard.

The clinical supervision I do is also a pleasure. It is exciting to watch graduate clinicians change and grow and it is a challenge to foster growth in the most positive, supportive, and effective manner possible. I also get to know graduate students as people and they are an incredible, giving, upbeat group.

Similarly, teaching undergraduate Abnormal Psychology and Health Psychology courses can be a ball. Around Halloween last year I introduced “Terrorific Trivia” as a quiz bowl. Shy students cheered teammates on and good students became prized commodities. The students have been very positive about my efforts to make classes fun, organized, and accessible. It still amazes me that I am getting paid to talk about fascinating topics with intelligent and engaging people. Being a professor offers many chances to get to know interesting people and make positive differences in their lives. It is very satisfying.

#### Annoying Surprises

To be consistent in my headings I should have titled this section “unpleasant surprises,” but that would be inaccurately negative. The less-than-pleasant surprises I have had since joining the faculty have largely consisted of minor annoyances. None have been devastating or earth-rending and most don’t interfere with my daily functioning as a professor. Many I had been warned about but had underestimated.

As adults, many of us gradually adjust to the notion that our parents are not the perfect superheroes we imagined during childhood. From the vantage point of adulthood, our parents appear to be unique and wonderful people with their own struggles, flaws, and failings. Our early views become more realistic and balanced. In much the same way, I have had to recalibrate my views of faculty. Many are fine people with a desire to help others and enlighten young minds, but some do have political or selfish agendas. All of them have faults and weaknesses. As a faculty member, I have a ring-side seat to the functioning or

dysfunction of my department and my colleagues. I have sometimes been disappointed and have needed to develop more reasonable expectations that take into account the imperfect humanness of my colleagues.

Henry Kissinger is quoted as saying that faculty disputes are acrimonious because the stakes are so low. I had heard that quote previously, but was not fully prepared for its reality. Faculty political disputes can become disagreeable and downright unsightly. Faculty meetings typically fall into one of two categories: mind-numbingly boring or electrically charged emotional melees. To be fair, temper tantrums are often triggered by topics about which the faculty member is passionate. Hiring new faculty members, structuring the graduate curriculum, and making decisions about troubled students are important and are never clear-cut. In charged debates, it is easy for untenured faculty to err in the direction of being overly timid and passive or overly outspoken, rushing into disputes that they may not fully understand. Surviving disagreements and debates unscathed has required diplomacy, attention, caution, and restraint. I have found it especially important to listen to and consider the various sides of each issue, even when one side initially sounds illogical. On occasion this strategy has involved approaching a senior faculty member, sometimes one with whom I was not well-acquainted, to ask for clarification and further explanation. Although I was initially nervous about how this approach would be received, senior faculty members typically have been pleased to be asked their opinions and were happy to share their views with me. I, in turn, became better educated about the larger departmental, administrative, financial, historical, and interpersonal contexts surrounding each debate.

In stark contrast to the metaphorical pushing and shoving before faculty votes on important topics, when the department chair asks for volunteers to serve on departmental committees, the silence is resounding. Committees seem to proliferate in academic settings. There are endless tasks, some trivial and some important, that you might be asked to do in service of the department or the university. It seems to be the rule that the better you are functioning, the more you are asked to do. It is a struggle to balance the desire to be a good

departmental citizen with the very real publishing demands that ultimately determine whether you will keep your position and secure your academic future. Drawing careful boundaries and saying no on occasion can be uncomfortable but is essential.

Ultimately, for me, interpersonal and political annoyances pale in comparison to the concern about suddenly being responsible for the academic and professional progress of graduate students. The buck stops here? Do I know what I'm doing? Being responsible for the experiences and, in some respects, foundations of future careers of my graduate students can be an intimidating prospect. The same way parents undoubtedly worry about whether they have raised their children "right," I worry about mistakes I might be making with my students and the potential impact of those mistakes. Consultations with senior faculty members to check my judgment have eased some of this anxiety and I am hoping that the residual anxiety will decrease with experience.

### Conclusions

All in all, being on the faculty is much the same as being in graduate school. There are multiple demands and to be successful you need to juggle and multi-task, albeit with more freedom and control. However, no one is assigned to look after you in role as a faculty member. It is easy to get caught up in the tyranny of the urgent. Instead, set rules for yourself about how you will spend your time. It is up to you to seek guidance, consider its merits, and then make your own decisions. I have benefited greatly from the expertise of colleagues who have provided comments on manuscript drafts, suggested data analytic strategies, and advised me on teaching, supervision, career choices, and departmental politics. Although I would suggest being an observer for the first year, withholding judgment about colleagues until you have more information, I would also urge you to stand up for what is right and give your opinion when it is genuinely sought. In most cases your colleagues will respect you more for it. With a thoughtful approach, being a professor can be fun. If you enjoy people and variety, it is hard not to like being a professor. I do.