

## **An Office of Your Own:**

### **The Virtues and Challenges of Independence as a New Faculty Member**

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Appalachian State University (ASU) is situated in the beautiful northwestern mountains of North Carolina and it is part of the University of North Carolina system, along with 15 other institutions. ASU has 12,750 undergraduates and 1,350 graduate students. The Psychology Department has 29 full-time doctoral-level faculty members and approximately 450 undergraduate majors and 36 master's-level graduate students. I am currently finishing my first year as a tenure-track assistant professor, with an emphasis on Developmental Psychology. Before accepting this position, I obtained my doctoral degree from the University of Georgia (UGA), completed a teaching postdoctoral program at Northern Michigan University (NMU), and completed a research postdoctoral fellowship at Pennsylvania State University (PSU).

#### **Transition From Graduate Student to Faculty Member**

When I finished my dissertation I had two job offers for faculty positions and an offer to do a teaching post-doc at NMU. Although it was tough for me to turn down tenure-track positions for a temporary post-doc position, I chose the riskier route because I felt I was not ready to commit to a faculty position. By the end of my graduate career I knew I strongly valued teaching and research, but I was unsure how much I wanted to do of each. I suspected it would be more difficult to change positions as a faculty member than to delay committing to a particular type of institution. I also wanted more experience in developmental psychology. Most of my formal coursework was in biopsychology at UGA where I studied eating behavior in nonhuman primates, but over time my research interests shifted toward developmental questions about eating behavior in children. At NMU, I could teach

developmental courses and explore the possibility of doing research with children. The reduced teaching load at NMU afforded me the time to write an NIH training grant proposal. I received the grant and then moved to Penn State to begin a three-year research postdoctoral assignment working in the area of children's behavioral nutrition. By the way, my husband is a graphic designer and illustrator so luckily he was able to move fairly easily from Georgia to Michigan to Pennsylvania to North Carolina.

My transition from graduate student to postdoctoral student to my current faculty position has been long, but smooth. The decision to do the post-docs was a good one for me in the long run. I think I experienced considerably less stress starting the position at ASU than if I had started a tenure-track position immediately out of graduate school. For instance, I no longer feel overly anxious in the hour just before teaching a class. The most challenging part of my first year has been continuing my work with collaborators at research-intensive institutions. Although I feel satisfied with my teaching and research accomplishments here at ASU, I am often concerned that my research productivity is a disappointment to my collaborators because I cannot work at their pace due to my teaching responsibilities.

#### Daily Activities

Ideally I should spend 50% of my time on teaching, 40% on research, and 10% on service. So far, this distribution of effort is a fairly accurate breakdown. Although most of my time is spent on teaching, decisions about tenure will be based primarily on my research productivity. Therefore, in addition to being a successful teacher, I am expected to publish either four peer-reviewed papers or publish three papers and receive funding for one externally-funded grant in five years. The papers may be published in 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> tier journals; if I publish in a top-level journal, it might count as two publications. I am also encouraged to present research at conferences and to become a journal reviewer. I am fortunate that I have been given fairly explicit guidelines about what is expected of me. Many of my colleagues at other institutions have to guess about these sorts of things.

Currently I teach two sections of Life-span Development that meet a total of five hours a week, and one section of Psychology of Parenting that meets two and one-half hours a week. During my first semester, I spent two to three hours preparing for every class I taught. Because I taught similar versions of those courses during my teaching post-doc, I did not have to spend as much preparation time as if the course had been a completely new one for me. I always feel that I could spend more time developing my lectures, reading more about the content, and perfecting the activities I plan. However, I know that spending too much time preparing lectures would be detrimental to accomplishing my research goals. I still aim for the highest quality in my teaching, but I now know that spending an inordinate amount of time on a lecture does not necessarily improve it (see Boice, 1990; McKeachie, 2002).

Another important part of my day is socializing, when possible. Unlike graduate school, there is not as much socializing with colleagues outside of work time. I am fortunate to be in an incredibly collegial department, so there are often activities on the weekend to attend. Although there is collegiality among faculty members, there is not the intense camaraderie that is often experienced among graduate students who are likely to spend large amounts of work time and free time together. I think this difference in relationships at the faculty level has the potential of making new faculty members feel alienated if they are not prepared for the change.

### Graduate Training

When I think about how I might have done things differently during graduate school there are a couple of points that come to mind. First, I suggest that graduate students take their journal club experiences seriously. If you do not participate in a journal club, you should start one. During my post-doc I began to receive requests to review manuscript submissions from various journals. It was then that I valued my journal club experiences. If you learn how to critique research in graduate school with colleagues, you will be much better able to do the same thing while alone at your desk as a new professor.

Another area in which I felt ill-prepared, until my post-doc, was grant writing and management. I wish now that I had asked my major professor more about the grants she had. For example, I thought at the time that it would be intrusive for me to ask her budgetary questions because I was part of her budget. Now I know that I should have been willing to approach people in order to get the answers I needed. I have learned how important it is to talk with program officers long before a grant is ever written as well as during the grant writing and grant management process. I think it is important to get grant experience even if you do not plan to be at a research-intensive institution. There are many kinds of grants available, including those for teaching, so faculty at any institution should be able to find one suitable to their needs.

At this point in my career I feel well-trained for my current position and I have thoroughly enjoyed life as a faculty member. Overall, I think my teaching and research have most benefited most from observing my psychology professors starting with my undergraduate institution, Furman University, from my interdisciplinary research experiences, from my opportunities to mentor undergraduates in research, and from participating in UGA's phenomenal Teaching Assistant (TA) Mentoring program. The TA Mentor program was particularly useful because I learned about teaching techniques, developed a teaching philosophy and a teaching portfolio, and was introduced to the scholarship of teaching for the first time. More than anything, participating in the program gave me a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence that I had not previously experienced as a graduate student. It was not my specific intent in graduate school to become a professor, but my experiences teaching in graduate school made me realize that I wanted teaching to be a major part of my career. The crowded office of my graduate school days served as an important laboratory for my development, but I am enjoying the freedom that accompanies my role as a faculty member.

#### References

Boice, R. (1990). *Advice for new faculty members*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

McKeachie, W. J. (2002). *McKeachie's teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (11<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.