

## **Making the Transition from Graduate Student to Assistant Professor**

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I received my PhD in social psychology from Saint Louis University in the summer of 2003 and began my professional career as assistant professor of psychology at Georgia Southern University (GSU) that fall. GSU is a comprehensive regional university that serves the rural coastal area of Southeast Georgia. It is located in Statesboro, GA, a small (population 23,000) town 60 miles west of historic Savannah. GSU has a current enrollment of 15,700 students, most of whom are Georgians who began as full-time freshmen. The Psychology Department has approximately 400 undergraduate majors, offers a master's degree in Experimental Psychology and a master's degree in Clinical Psychology, and has 14 full-time faculty members. When I interviewed at GSU, I fell in love with the Psychology faculty. They are a warm and compassionate group who genuinely care about each other. The department prides itself on following the GSU's "teaching first" philosophy, yet it also values and supports research endeavors. This philosophy was a great match with mine, as I equally love teaching and research. As a new faculty member, I was especially encouraged to focus on my teaching first, followed by research and service.

### Teaching

During my first semester of teaching, I marveled at how fast the days flew by. I did not think it was possible, but I found myself being even busier than when I was a graduate student. In our department the typical course load is three courses per semester. My department chair gave me a break, assigning me to teach two sections of undergraduate research methods, and one section of graduate applied research methods for the first-year clinical master's students. Hence, I taught three courses, but only had two course preparations, and they were in the same content area. Nevertheless, I found it difficult to balance my time between the two different courses. Knowing that undergraduate students usually dread taking

research methods, I focused my time and energy into this course, with the goal of making it the best research methods course ever. I may have come close to succeeding (with an average evaluation of 4.8 on a 5-point scale), but my graduate course suffered for it. My relative inattention to the graduate course was evident to the students, and they were not happy about it. This lesson was important for me to learn—that balance is a key to being a successful teacher. Instead of striving to make any one course the “best ever,” it is a much better and more obtainable goal to have several “good” courses. In my second semester, I taught three different courses, the undergraduate research methods course, a new graduate research design course, this time for the first-year experimental master’s students, and a psychology and law course (for undergraduate and graduate students). I made myself spend an equal amount of time preparing each course, and the result was that each course was evaluated very well. None were the best ever, but more importantly, none were poor.

### Research

I had every intention of collecting data my first semester as an assistant professor, although it was certainly not expected of me by the department. I anticipated conducting a follow-up experiment to my dissertation on stereotype suppression and collectively writing up the studies for publication during the winter break. I imagined returning to the subject of my master’s thesis, sexual harassment research, and dreamed of conducting focus groups to start a new line of research on date rape, but time eluded me. Days, weeks, and then months rushed by, and I still had not begun collecting any data, nor, for that matter, written an IRB proposal. I wondered how other faculty members managed both to teach and conduct research, and then I realized how much they utilized their graduate assistants. I had been assigned two graduate assistants, but thus far, had made little use of them—the memory of being a stressed out graduate student was too fresh in my mind. I found it extremely difficult to ask my assistants to do any work for me, especially any work that I thought might seem tedious or trivial to them. This lesson was another important experience for me to have—that delegation of tasks is important to being a productive researcher. Furthermore, I realized that a graduate student’s

role of helping a professor is not inherently stressful. As long as I treated my assistants respectfully, and remembered what it was like to be a graduate student, I could make the research process beneficial for all of us. During my second semester, congruent with the tasks assigned by other faculty members, I asked my assistants to help me conduct literature searches, make copies, and collect and enter data. With their help, I was able to collect all of the data I needed for the follow-up experiment to my dissertation, and my graduate assistants gained important knowledge and skills.

### Service

In our department, faculty members typically advise 25-30 undergraduate students each semester. This advisement involves meeting individually with each student, often several times, to plan the student's course schedule. During my first year my department chair gave me a break on my service requirements, by eliminating this expectation. Instead, I sat in on a few advisement sessions so that I would be prepared to advise during my second year. Other service activities include serving on committees (e.g., master's theses, graduate student admissions, new faculty searches, annual awards ceremony, and newsletter). Faculty members are also expected to provide service outside of the department, both to GSU and to the surrounding community. In my first year I chaired a master's thesis and served on two master's committees. I also served as the faculty advisor for Phi Sigma Pi, an undergraduate honor fraternity. These service activities were time consuming. Initially I regretted making such commitments, sure that it would detract from my beloved teaching and research. However, I learned another important lesson—that mentoring students is one of the greatest joys of being a professor. Mentoring allowed me to get to know students on a personal level. I learned their personalities and their social backgrounds. I learned their fears and hopes for the future. In short, interacting closely with students brought new meaning to my teaching and research—I am inspired to do my best so that I can help these wonderful students.

## Conclusion

I loved my first year as an assistant professor at GSU. Life as a faculty member is more rewarding than I ever imagined it would be. However, it is also much more time consuming than I thought it would be. (I now feel compassion and admiration for my graduate professors—whereas in the past I sometimes found the time it took them to return a paper inconceivable). During this first year, I learned many valuable lessons, including the importance of balance and task delegation and the joys of mentoring. I have a wonderful job, and I cannot wait for the next semester to begin.