

My First Year as Assistant Professor: Learning to be Free

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We might facilitate the production, through our educational system, of persons who will be adaptive and creative, able to make responsible choices, open to the kaleidoscopic changes in their world, worthy citizens of a fantastically expanding universe. It seems at least a possibility that in our schools and colleges...individuals could learn to be free.

Rogers and Stevens (1967)

Fort Lewis College (FLC) is a state-supported, public 4-year liberal arts college with accredited programs in Arts, Humanities, Natural and Behavioral Sciences, Business Administration, and Education. FLC is proud of its special commitment to peoples of the Southwest—roughly 20% of its 4400 students are Native American or Hispanic. The college rests on the arts, sciences, and humanities as the core of a liberal education and as the essential foundation for professionalism. FLC has been called Colorado's "campus in the sky," since it is located in Durango, a town of 16,000 residents situated at 6,512 feet above sea level in the Four Corners region.

In Spring 2004, I completed my first year as an assistant professor in the FLC Psychology Department, which is the third-largest on campus with about 280 majors. Because FLC is primarily a teaching college, I am not subjected to the dreaded "publish or perish" axiom of pre-tenure academia. Instead, my job performance is judged in three different areas, listed in order of importance: teaching, scholarship, and service. My teaching load is "3-3" so I teach 3 courses each semester. Scholarship is defined broadly at FLC, ranging from traditional research published in peer-reviewed journals to conference presentations,

workshops, books and book chapters, and even clinical work. The goal is for professors to stay active and current in their field, with the ultimate aim of enriching their own teaching as well as involving students in research. Service includes “extra” things that we do for the college or for the community. For example, I am the advisor for Psi Chi (the National Honor Society in Psychology) and I work part-time in the student counseling center.

My typical day as a first-year faculty member was busy, especially because I am working on my post-doctoral hours for licensure as a psychologist in Colorado (1500 total clinical hours, although teaching can count for 500 and research can count for another 500 of this total). On a typical day, I taught a class at 8 AM and another at 11 AM, with office hours in between, before going to lunch in our common cafeteria, sitting with other faculty, administrators (at FLC you can dine with the VP), and sometimes students. After lunch, I went either to the recreation center to workout or to the counseling center where I worked from 1-5 PM twice a week, counseling students, supervising an intern, and attending staff meetings. I would take one day off on weekends, usually to do something in our wonderful Colorado outdoors such as ski, bike, or hike. On the other day of the weekend, I would finish my teaching preparation for the coming week (6-8 hours of work) so that I could do other things during the working day or on weekday evenings. I would use my free time during the working day for those essential, but seemingly small tasks that seem to pile up for professors: meeting with students, grading, reading (articles or teaching ideas), writing (reference letters, my own scholarship), and, of course, e-mailing. I worked about 40-50 hours per week during this first year, quite reasonable considering I can take the entire summer off if I so choose.

Overall, I would describe my year as a rousing success—both professionally and personally—in which I fell in love with my surroundings and the Durango community. I attribute my success partly to the fact that I figured out early on as a clinical psychology graduate student at the University of Arizona that I liked teaching, counseling, and research—in that order. Although my colleagues in graduate school spent hours in the research lab, I spent more of my time teaching my own classes every summer (as instructor of record) and

attending teaching conferences (e.g., NITOP). I also created my own minor in College Teaching as a graduate student, enabling me to take several academic courses to improve my pedagogical practices. When I started my job at FLC, I had already taught four different classes, which helped me construct a detailed teaching portfolio, which is handy for job applications, and made my first-year workload significantly lighter. Looking back on the year, I have culled 10 tips for new professors at teaching-oriented colleges and universities:

1. Move to town at least a month before the academic year begins. Make a comprehensive list of what you need to do in order to set up at the job (e.g., office, computer, e-mail account, Web page, phone and copy number, business cards, campus ID card, parking pass, orientation). Settle in at work and at home before the students arrive.

2. As you prepare for the upcoming semester, work in short, regular sessions rather than trying to cram your preparation into marathon days—your enjoyment and engagement will undoubtedly be enhanced in this way (Boice, 1996).

3. Learn to manage your time effectively so that the many small tasks you have will not become overwhelming. Time management guru Stephen Covey (1994) explained that effective people spend little time on tasks that are “urgent and important,” often called problems or crises. Instead, these people spend most of their time on tasks that are important but not yet urgent. Activities in these areas include preparation, planning, relationship-building, and recreation.

4. Take at least one day off weekly to play or relax in order to keep your life in balance.

5. Be involved on campus, for instance, by engaging in college service or by attending graduation and other events.

6. Respect institutional culture. Start slow in terms of suggesting changes, learn how things work before criticizing them, and be attuned to your own interpersonal functioning. Do others find you bossy, arrogant, grumpy, or timid? Think about how you can make small changes in your own approach to be a better “teammate.” My wife suggested a brilliant

strategy for befriending your essential ally, the department's administrative assistant: Take time to make small talk when you don't need something.

7. Get to know people. Keep a list of names and add to it whenever you meet someone new on or off campus.

8. Connect to the community outside of campus (e.g., join a team or group, meet your neighbors). If you love where you live, you will be happier at your job.

9. Consult with your colleagues (e.g., ask for course materials and sample syllabi). This type of interaction serves two vital purposes: it conveys respect, and you can learn a great deal from those who have been teaching at your institution for many years.

10. Get to know your students—even in large classes, take photos so you can learn your students' names within a few weeks. It is by far the most effective of all classroom management tools.

Above all, take Dr. Rogers' advice about learning—and teaching others—to be free; it's within your grasp if you arrange your life so that you're free to do what you love most.

References

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