

Moving On: Making the Transition from Graduate Student to Faculty Member

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I began teaching in the fall of 2002 at Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA), a Master's I level, public institution of approximately 10,000 students in Nacogdoches, Texas. SFA's Psychology Department of 13 faculty members serves approximately 350 undergraduate majors and supports four master's-level graduate tracks—Clinical, Experimental, Industrial/Organizational, and Teaching of Psychology. SFA's atmosphere has been ideal in making the transition from graduate student to faculty member.

Recently a student in my class interviewed me for a project in another class; my task was to describe a typical workday as a professor. I discussed reviewing student grant proposals, editing an electronic column for the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (Division 2 of the American Psychological Association), reading students' theses, and working on a paper of my own. After 15 min, he said, "You haven't mentioned teaching our class." I realized then that although some of the tasks I enumerated are teaching related, they are activities I do outside the classroom. Although being in the classroom is (almost) always the highlight of my day, it is also, for better or worse, the least time consuming part of my day. Below, I discuss this point and other lessons I've learned since moving from being a graduate student to becoming a faculty member.

Juggling: Learning How to Multi-Task

One surprising aspect of my new job is how much time I spend on non-teaching, non-research tasks. As a graduate student, I was busy teaching and finishing my dissertation. However, that type of busyness—single-minded and individually focused—is not the same busyness that you experience when you have to juggle your time as a faculty member. In comparison to myriad activities in my day now, my relative focus in graduate school seems like a luxury.

During the first years as an assistant professor, research can easily take a back seat to more pressing demands on your time, especially new course preparations (Taylor & Martin, 2004). In addition, starting your own lab is considerably more time consuming than working in a lab for which you do not have sole responsibility. You might be struggling for start-up costs or managing logistics of ordering equipment. These tasks can be overwhelming, especially when added to your other duties.

Thus, appropriate time management is imperative to success as a new faculty member. As my mentor told me, it's very easy to be busy doing unimportant activities. Spending time setting short- and long-term goals, and matching your daily activities to those goals, can make your first years more effective, rather than simply efficient.

Changing How I Taught

As a graduate student, I was fortunate to be the instructor of record for several classes. I also had the opportunity to take several teaching seminars; unfortunately, the majority of graduate students do not have such preparation for teaching (Buskist, Tears, Davis, & Rodrigue, 2002), although the STP is currently attempting to address this problem. Because I had the chance to teach in graduate school, and had active teaching mentors, my teaching transition may have been less difficult relative to many new faculty members. Nevertheless, teaching in graduate school was very different from teaching as a full-time faculty member. As a graduate student instructor, I loved teaching and devoted much of my time to teaching only one class. As a faculty member, suddenly I was teaching two undergraduate classes and one graduate class, and I wanted to grant the same attention to each of those courses. It was not possible. I had to select carefully activities that would add the most value to my students' experiences and jettison things that added less value. This has been—and remains—a very difficult task for me.

Overzealous new faculty members can easily take on too much with their classes. They may continually alter their classes, include time-consuming activities, learn and incorporate new technology into classes, and neglect delegating duties to their TAs (if they

are lucky enough to have one). These practices can result in unnecessary stress for a new faculty member. Finding ways to reduce stress is vital to maintaining the quality of, and enthusiasm for, your teaching (King, 2004).

The Things No One Tells You

Although I felt qualified to teach and conduct research, there were some things for which I was not prepared. First, being a graduate student kept me partially insulated from the budgetary and political issues that confronted me as a new faculty member. Department chairs and administrators make decisions in a fiscal climate. If you are aware of the possible issues and have some knowledge about how administrators make decisions, you will be more prepared when these decisions do not go the way you had hoped.

University politics was a new experience for me as well. Taylor and Martin (2004) suggested that new faculty members “not take strong stands on issues [they] do not understand immediately after arriving at the university” (p. 370). I have found that this advice includes most issues. Although it is advantageous to learn about topics and participate in discussions, you may not have enough information to be definitive in your position until you have been at the institution for a while. Nonetheless, it is good practice to be informed and speak up for yourself. For example, when moving from graduate student to faculty member, you are not used to having resources and, therefore, may accept relatively little in terms of start-up costs or research space (Rasmussen, 2001). Being vocal about these things is a good practice and is important for your academic success. The key is knowing when to have a strong opinion and being able to support that opinion.

Next, learning how to say, “No” to activities that do not contribute to your overall goals is imperative to success as an academic. Because you will be juggling many duties as a new faculty member, it is important to select your commitments carefully. If you do not learn to make judicious choices, you may perform tasks poorly, thus affecting your reputation as both teacher and scholar. A better route, as I have learned, is to add extra tasks slowly, so that you are always performing optimally. If you link your daily tasks to your short- and long-term

goals, you can be sure that you are spending time on truly worthwhile investments (King, 2004).

Finally, faculty life can be lonely and isolated (King, 2004). In graduate school, you have a built-in network of friends; your social support system and your work intertwine. As a new faculty member, the departmental dynamics are different. You have to start building such a supportive network of friends and colleagues anew. You may not have time immediately to make friends outside of your department. However, making time for friends and family is crucial for your overall well-being and success (Taylor & Martin, 2004).

Love Your Job

Recognizing the benefits of academic jobs helps keep the minor difficulties in perspective. Take time to enjoy and celebrate your own and your students' successes and maintain your enthusiasm for teaching (see Lloyd, 1999). In *Teaching Tips*, McKeachie (2002) said, "I continue to be exhilarated going to class...Teaching is still fun for me" (p. 319). I feel the same way after 2 years. I plan to feel the same way after 50 years.

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