

TP Msg. #976 How to Succeed in the Academy: A Chair's Advice to Junior Faculty

As a department chair I frequently look for material I can discuss with my faculty during orientation, annual review, and monthly faculty development meetings. To aid chairs and other administrators in mentoring their junior faculty, this article offers seven reliable rules they can share with their new faculty to help guide them to success in the academy.

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The posting below gives seven practical rules for junior faculty success. It is by Shala Mills, J.D., chair and associate professor of political science at Fort Hays State University, Hays, Kansas. Email: samills@fhsu.edu The article appeared in The Department Chair: A Resource for Academic Administrators, Fall, 2009, Vol. 20, No. 2. For further information on how to subscribe, as well as pricing and discount information, please contact, Sandy Quade, Account Manager, John Wiley & Sons, Phone: (203) 643-8066 (squadepe@wiley.com). or see: <http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-DCH.htm>

Regards,

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Tomorrow's Academia

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How to Succeed in the Academy: A Chair's Advice to Junior Faculty

During fifteen years on a state university campus serving in administrative and faculty positions, I have observed dozens of faculty across disciplines as they were hired, fired, retired, promoted, or disciplined.

Quality teaching, scholarship, and service are important, but there are other commonsense rules that are sometimes overlooked by junior faculty burdened by the stress and anxiety of the tenure and promotion process.

As a department chair I frequently look for material I can discuss with my faculty during orientation, annual review, and monthly faculty development meetings. To aid chairs and other administrators in mentoring their junior faculty, this article offers seven reliable rules they can share with their new faculty to help guide them to success in the academy.

Rule 1: Know Yourself

Professional success and satisfaction depend in large part on the right fit. To find it, you must know yourself. Of the myriad higher education settings available, which is best for your strengths, interests, and values? Are you better suited for a large flagship university with a thriving graduate program, or a small private liberal arts campus focused on undergraduates? Are you more interested in working with the best and brightest students in elite programs, or is your heart in finding promising minds among largely first-generation college students? Is your primary focus on scholarship or teaching? Is civic engagement or service-learning important to you? These are just a few of the questions you must answer to find the right fit for your academic future.

Your graduate experience should have prepared you for a professional environment where you will be happy and productive. You should have directed your job applications to institutions that fit your experience, skill set, and professional objectives. You will not serve yourself or your institution well in an environment that neither plays to your strengths nor resonates with your values. Much of the frustration I have observed in higher education has been the product of someone taking a position in an institution that was a poor fit.

Rule 2: Know What Is Expected of You and Deliver It

Most of those I have seen fail in academia have been individuals who did not deliver on expectations. Such colleagues did not carry out their assigned tasks, failed to finish degrees or certifications required for their position, violated institutional policies or procedures, disregarded regulations, or outright broke the law. Your position description provides the first glimpse into your department's expectations. Understand what the department hired you to do, and deliver. As departmental and institutional needs change, your position description may change as well. Keep current on what your administrators expect from your position as it evolves over time.

Most institutions require an annual statement of responsibilities, and this provides an opportunity to review expectations on a regular basis. Similarly, your year-end review provides a chance to reflect on your performance and articulate how it was an attempt to live up to expectations. It is also a chance for you to understand your chair's perspective on your performance and clarify his or her expectations for your position.

Know and stay in compliance with all institutional and departmental policies and procedures. Guidelines regarding tenure and promotion are certainly among those with which you should be familiar, but do not overlook other requirements that relate to your professional success. Scrutinize your faculty handbook, departmental guidelines, memorandum of agreement (if your campus has collective bargaining), and other documents that contain regulations to which you will be expected to adhere.

Teaching, scholarship, and service are the common components of a faculty member's position. You should be familiar with all policies regarding these three areas of performance. You should also master any policies related to other tasks you will likely be assigned. If you serve as an academic advisor, you will need to be an expert in your program and degree requirements and be familiar with policies, offices, and technologies that relate to academic advising. If you sponsor a student club or organization, master everything related to guiding the group in accordance with university regulations.

Rule 3: Further Your Institutional and Departmental Missions

The most successful members of the academy understand the missions of their institution and department and find meaningful ways to further these missions. Understand any performance agreement your institution has with any oversight bodies. Listen to your administrators to learn which projects or concerns seem to be their greatest priorities. Can your discipline or department be an asset in addressing those needs and concerns? Can your research interests further progress in one or more priority areas?

Institutional and departmental support, financial and otherwise, tends to follow projects and performances that further institutional and departmental goals. As a result, faculty who are innovative in supporting those goals are generally rewarded for their efforts. If you have followed Rule 1 and share common values with your institutional and departmental missions, then you should find Rule 3 both rewarding and productive.

In contrast, faculty who work against the institutional and/or departmental missions generally find themselves at odds with their administration and frustrated in their work. Excellence in teaching, scholarship, and service will not save your career if you are actively undermining institutional or departmental goals. If you find your institutional mission anathema, reflect on whether the problem is the integrity of the mission or because you are not a good fit for your institution.

Rule 4: Never Lie

Nothing destroys administrative confidence in a faculty member more surely and completely than deceit. An administrator may continue to have faith in a faculty member who is learning to be a better teacher, developing a coherent research agenda, or finding a way to meaningful service. But discovering that a faculty member is a liar is a death sentence in terms of administrative confidence. Bottom line: Do not deceive your administrators, colleagues, support staff, or students. Once the people you work with

lose confidence in your veracity, you may find it difficult, if not impossible, to ever regain their trust.

Rule 5: Respect Everyone

Be collegial in all your working relationships. Sycophantic behavior is not the goal. Rather, avoid creating antagonistic relationships. You do not have to be gregarious and outgoing. You do not always have to agree regarding disciplinary, departmental, or institutional concerns. But you should treat everyone in your work environment with respect. That respect should not be accorded to your administrators and senior faculty only. It is something that everyone you encounter deserves, whether they are faculty, students, staff, or custodians. Respect the work of others. Respect their time. Know their names, acknowledge their efforts, and show appreciation for the work they do.

Collegiality extends to students. We can hold students accountable without treating them with disrespect. A lack of collegiality with students can lead to diminished effectiveness in the classroom, a negative reputation as a teacher, and poor teaching evaluations. These, in turn, may negatively affect other important outcomes such as recruitment and retention in your department. Even when students have behaved in ways that require disciplinary action, you must continue to treat them with respect even as you hold them accountable for their actions. And always keep in mind that part of respecting students is respecting their evaluation of your performance.

Rule 6: Pick Your Battles

It is unreasonable to assume that you will never have workplace conflict. Whether it is a disagreement over the direction of a new project or an impasse over a curriculum change, you will inevitably run into situations where your integrity requires you to stand your ground on something. Indeed, your institution needs your integrity. You may be the one person who can bring to light the weaknesses in a flawed proposal. But be cautious.

Choose your battles wisely, don't engage conflict too frequently, and always consider such engagement in light of the other six rules. It is rarely worthwhile to take positions that are at odds with legal precedent or university policy (unless, of course, you are challenging that very precedent or policy; if so, you must understand the uphill battle you fight). Carefully consider whether your position is at odds with the institutional or departmental mission (and again, if you are challenging that mission, understand that you are the underdog). If you have a problem with an individual at work, talk to that person, not about them. When you must be critical, aim at the problem, not the person. Hear others as you would wish to be heard-with respect. You can, as the saying goes, disagree without being disagreeable.

Rule 7: Own Your Mistakes

We all make mistakes, some more serious than others. You are not infallible. Even the most successful careers have their share of errors. So when you make a mistake, own it, do your best to make things

right, and learn from the experience. Looking at your mistakes as an opportunity to gain valuable experience will serve you far better than trying to cover them up, lie about them, or shift blame.

Conclusion

Department chairs who offer this practical advice to their junior faculty members can help them achieve success in the academy. By combining these seven rules with quality teaching, scholarship, and service, new faculty are likely to find themselves enjoying a rewarding and well-supported academic career.

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