Productive Professor or Struggling Faculty?
Starting Your New Academic Position Right

Modified, with permission, from a VU presentation by
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See also: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r21SXck_7kI

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Starting a new faculty position

• Mechanics
  • Formal description
  • Review/ evaluation

• Challenges & Strategies
Job description

Varies by institution, but for R1, often something like this:

• 40-60% Research
  • Original, scholarly investigations
  • Dissemination of results through publication

• 40-30% Teaching
  • Formal courses
  • Undergraduate and graduate research training

• 20-10% Service
  • Department/ university committees
  • Service to one’s profession—reviewing, etc.
Academic Titles/Labels

• Assistant Professor
• Associate Professor
• Professor
• “Chair”

• Others
  • Research Professor
  • Lecturer/Instructor
  • Adjunct Professor
  • ... and more ...
Feedback/Evaluations

Varies greatly across departments/universities

- Formal or informal feedback from mentor/chair
- Feedback from chair on annual report
  - Written feedback
  - % raise relative to mean/median % raise
- Three-year pre-tenure review
- Tenure review
Components/Criteria of Reviews

• Research
  • External reviewers’ comments on impact of work
  • Number & placement of publications, grant funding, invitations to present, awards, “h-index”

• Teaching
  • Student course evaluations, enrollments/load, faculty evaluation, innovation/need
  • Success of trainees

• Service
  • Rarely a major factor except when extreme
Sounds straightforward... but it’s not...

Most Ph.D. students/M.D. and M.D.-PhDs and postdocs:
• Have never managed a research team
  • Not been responsible for success of others
  • Not had to rely heavily/completely on others for their own success
    • Yielding of control
  • Never had to assess performance of others (& hire/fire)
• Never operated with essentially NO supervision
• Have never created a “course” and all lectures
• Have never had major “service” roles
Motivation for Dr. Noor’s book...
Starting a new faculty position

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  • Getting started
  • Personnel
  • Communications
Getting started...

- ORGANIZATION
  - Record-keeping
  - Research projects
  - Classes
  - Time
  - People

- PERSONAL
Keeping records—Assume nothing!

• Offer letter promises
• Will need to access e-mails years later
• Remember/confirm expected timing of events
  • Your university/Chair may not remember when they’re supposed to ask for your tenure materials!
• Keep copies of
  • Teaching evaluations
  • Annual assessments
  • Records of all talks given, papers reviewed, undergrads in your lab
• Plan for what will be 30+ years...
Research projects!

- Need to conceive 4 kinds of projects at start
  - Quick/easy/self-contained – “a figure” (for undergrads, rotations, etc.)
  - “Preliminary data”/risky projects
  - Medium-term, publishable “safe” projects
  - Long-term, high-impact research directions

- Decide Who within your group does which?
Research project funding!

- Plan WAY ahead
  - Get preliminary data, AND get LOTS of feedback on proposal (*internal* & *external*)

- Don’t compete with former advisers
- Don’t propose “too much”
- Think “transformative”
Classes!

• Don’t teach only senior seminars!
  • Want to use class to recruit to your lab

• Takes time, different points of view
  • Assume 6+ hours of preparation for 1 hour lecture
    • Some say advance preparation allows one to get ahead/practice/prepare
    • Some say will rescript night before irrespective, so better to leave most to last minute
Time/Efficiency!

• Use an online calendar—no Doodle polls!
• Strategies for keeping up with scientific literature
• Organization of “thoughts”
  • Good e-filing system(s)
• Schedule strategic time
  • Don’t look at e-mail in it!!!
• Family time
  • Guilt
ACTIVITY

Set your *per-week* time for the next YEAR. You are married and have 2 kids & dog.

- 53 hours/wk for sleep. Can expand if need more than 7.5 hr sleep/night on average. Can **not** decrease.
- 14 hours/wk for food/food prep
- 4 hours/wk commuting (assumes live ~23 min from campus, going ~5 days per week)
- 5 hours/wk miscellaneous (e.g., bathroom, grooming, showering, etc); Cannot decrease without getting fired

**92 hours left to assign** -> **this is professional time**
People!

- If startup allows, start with a lab tech!
  - DO NOT get a grad student or postdoc in first months

- Set groundwork AND groundrules immediately
  - Set up the lab so people can “get started” on arrival
  - Start thinking about **YOUR** “rules of the lab”
    - Real time data logging; regular, systematic data archiving using YOUR nomenclature and e-systems; lab safety; lab priorities; ordering purchases; conflict resolution, what it takes to attend a scientific meeting,...

- Start thinking about authorship policies
  - Keep in mind your interests AND your teams’ interests

- Start thinking about **realistic** expectations for grad students
  - Include expectations of yourself to them—**formalize both via a written document.**
PERSONAL ISSUES

• Imposter complex rampant (both you and trainees)
• No one is looking over your shoulder
  • No immediate supervisor
• Responsibilities never had before, at home and work

• GET HELP FROM YOUR COLLEAGUES/ADMINISTRATORS
  • Invested in you—want you to succeed
  • Ask advice in all areas
  • **Initiate** frequent and regular Mentoring committee meetings
  • Get feedback on anything written
  • Ask for lecture slides and watch local/regional/national role models
  • Find your own mentors---in addition to your formal mentoring committee!
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Things to realize immediately

• 99.9% of those in your lab are not like you
  • The “early you” wasn’t even like you
  • Your bar **WILL BE too high** at first

• Trainee independence will be very, very low at first; Indeed *independence is earned* and not a birthright.

• You’re not going to re-create something like your postdoc adviser’s lab until post-tenure

• **You’re not “one of the team” any more**
  • You swing an “invisible hammer” with every word you say
  • And you can’t let your feelings get (visibly) hurt— you will hurt other people (your people) and get bad-mouthed (unfairly?!?) in the process. Universities are small, gossipy communities.
Loss of control...

• Most PhD students and postdocs have “control” of their projects (at least their “part” of project)
  • Their hands do the work, they log results, they make the calculations and prepare the figures (i.e. primary data)
• As PI, you lose much of the control over these things
  • FULLY relying on others to do parts (or all) of projects
  • Won’t know status in real-time
  • Info on work “filtered” by communication
  • Will often find parts done “not as you would have done”

• Supervisor, not just “worker”
Have to do “the bad/hard stuff”

- Like ourselves, most people will have a mix of strengths & weaknesses
  - It’s YOUR JOB to figure out these attributes and tell them both, clearly & explicitly, in order to maximize each individual’s success (and thus yours and the lab in toto).

- Problems in lab will trickle to you; usually “late”
- Types of problems (& possible solutions)
- People need opportunities! Opportunities to succeed (and grow), and fail (and grow).

Critical feedback “sandwich”
People are still people...

• Some of your trainees will be
  • Brilliant, communicative, creative, fun, generous, hard-working, motivated, respectful, thoughtful

• Some of your trainees will be
  • Annoying, arrogant, dense, lazy, selfish, uncommunicative, unmotivated, whiny

• Variance among people and across time
• YOU MUST adapt to individual styles!
• YOU MUST provide the same opportunities to all!
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Availability ~ Information Flow

• For any problem not an emergency, PI usually won’t hear until later
• Big advantage to PI “swinging by to check in” often

• MAKE IT CLEAR TO YOUR TEAM HOW/WHEN YOU EXPECT TO HEAR FROM THEM
  • Are you OK with “office drop-ins”?  
  • What turnaround do you expect for e-mails (both sides)?  
  • What are reasonable/unreasonable deadlines?

• Appreciate the implications of your actions...
One-on-One meetings

• I recommend weekly in-person for PhD students and postdocs

• Maintain an agenda all week
  • Both you & trainee add to it organically
  • Document: anticipated timelines/deadlines/important decisions made

• Remember the meeting is for BOTH OF YOU

• Ask open-ended general questions
  • About research
  • About future plans
Group/Lab Meetings

• Good for bonding/updating
• “Roundtable”
• Main agenda item(s)
  • Research paper discussion
  • Going over draft ms/proposal
  • Presentation on research
  • In-depth strategic planning
  • General updates
• Adjust for group composition
Collaborations and Sharing

• Normal part of science

• But your “kingdom” ends with the walls of the lab
  • Very little leverage if have collaborator not fulfilling duty

• Discuss with lab members what’s OK to share vs. not outside the lab

• Document terms of collaboration and authorship issues sooner than later.
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“The other stuff”...

- Teaching!
- Service?
- Preparing for tenure
Teaching: It’s your job

• Spurring research: Inclusive fitness
  • What inspired you?
  • What turned you off?

• Role of colleges and universities
Serious pre-planning

• Who are my students?
  • What is their background?
  • Why are they in my class?

• What do I want to (& what can I) achieve?
  • Depth vs. breadth vs. interest
  • Being realistic on retention
  • Few specific “learning goals” for each class

• THEN develop course...
Course strategies

• Least effective but most common: straight lecture
  • But students often “WANT” this...

• Learning through communities

• Evidence-based teaching
  • Accept that you’ll not succeed sometimes
  • Keep trying new things, revise often!
  • The “Flipped Classroom” approach

• Remember diversity
  • Your students are NOT LIKE YOU ARE or WERE...
Importance of success

• Upper-level class professors depend on your success

• Students’ futures may depend on your success of transmission
  • MCAT, Subject GRE, LSAT etc.

• Students’ futures may be affected by how you stimulate their interest

• Your promotion/salary may be affected (somewhat to alot) depending upon your school/position
“The other stuff”...

• Teaching!

• Service: The time sink...

• Preparing for tenure
Types of service

• Student duties
  • Academic advising, external review of honors theses

• Departmental committees
  • Standing, searches, PhD students, “timely” (e.g., retreat)

• Interdepartmental/University committees

• Professional service
  • Paper/grant proposal reviews, panels, editorships, society committees or offices

• Community outreach
Coping -- university

• DO NOT OVERCOMMIT
• DO NOT OVERCOMMIT
• DO NOT OVERCOMMIT

• Be pro-active to request SOME service that you’d actually want
  • Graduate recruitment committee?
• Ask questions about effort from current members and your mentoring committee
• Use your status as untenured to limit load
  • But don’t do “zero”
Coping -- external

• DO NOT agree to review more than 1-2 papers at a time
• DO NOT agree to review papers if you can’t meet the deadline
• One early grant panel service helpful, but limit since study section membership is a massive commitment
• Don’t agree to editorship unless tenure is basically locked (e.g., your record dramatically exceeds others who’ve recently gotten tenure)
“The other stuff”...

• Teaching!
• Service: The time sink...
• Preparing for tenure
Submitting your tenure dossier...

• Navigate to Faculty Affairs Website for details (https://medschool.vanderbilt.edu/faculty/basic-science-investigatorphysician-scientist-investigator-track)

• Submit to department (often via chair)
  • CV (You must use the VU approved standard format)
  • Intellectual development statements on research, teaching, and service
  • PDFs of 4 papers (indicate your unique contributions)
  • Lists of courses/contact hours/# of trainees, and course evaluations
  • Course syllabi

• You CAN suggest for or against particular external reviewers
Who evaluates

• Division or Department faculty
• Department review committee
• Department chair
• External reviewers
• College/School PT committee
• College/School dean/Executive Faculty
• University/VUMC PT committee
• Provost
• Chancellor and Board of Trust
Criteria (from Vanderbilt handbook)

• Have already achieved and who show promise of continuing to achieve a level of excellence in their contribution to the research, scholarship, or creative expression appropriate to their discipline
  • originality, logical rigor, distinctiveness of ideas, creativity of expression, independence of thought in identifying projects and framing issues for analysis, advancement of a theoretical viewpoint or a perceptive and balanced criticism of such a viewpoint, and significant and important intellectual impact.

• Active scientists, scholars, critics, or artists

• Completed and made available research, scholarship, criticism, or artistic production of such high quality as to gain favorable recognition within their discipline and at a national level.
  • When candidates participate in group research projects, it is their responsibility to provide a means for distinguishing their contributions from those of other members of the group. Both past achievements and future promise, both the quantity and the quality of completed work, determine one’s eligibility for tenure.
What do evaluators look for? (Broader concepts)

• Quantifiable progress since starting as a faculty member, independent of former advisors
  • Are you recognized as “the go-to person” or “the expert” in one or more areas; how do you rank relative to peers at other equivalent institutions?
  • What are specific novel, broader insights attributable to your recent work?
• What is your research trajectory and sustainability?
• Are your contributions to collaborative works clear?
What do evaluators look for?
(Secondary metrics of previous)

• Publication of articles in top-tier and well-respected journals in your discipline

• Recognition and specific comments on the impact of your work by senior external expert reviewers

• Other metrics:
  • Grant support
  • Research and/or teaching awards
  • Invitations to present work nationally and ultimately internationally
  • Service on national grant review panels and professional societies
  • Membership on Scientific Journal Editorial Boards
There’s rarely a good “formula”

Wouldn’t need PT if such formulae existed

• “7 papers in journals with impact factor 7”
• “6 positive and no more than 1 negative letter”

Much more nuanced view on impact of work and how it compares to people at similar career stage at peer/lead institutions
Do teaching and service matter?

• Short answer: “Less”

• From Vanderbilt website:
  • Excellence in research, scholarship, or creative expression is required
  • A high level of effectiveness in teaching is required
  • Satisfactory performance of service to the university and/or to professional and learned societies is required
Other fears/ rumors

• PT committee influenced by budgetary considerations of college or university

• PT committee “looks for reasons to decline”

• In reality, PT committee goes far out of its way to be fair to candidates if they were treated wrongly (e.g., misadvised at reappointment)
A few tips… (part 1 of 2)

• Don’t spread yourself too thin at first–
  • Make yourself “the go-to person” in a few topics rather than making incremental progress in many

• Elaborate your independent contributions to collaborative projects

• Follow advice given in your 4th year review
  • Fill any gaps!

• “Base hits” really do count
  • Don’t wait to publish until the year you go up for tenure!
A few tips... (part 2 of 2)

• Get your research well-known—offer to present lots, and accept invitations to present!
• Have someone critical (especially if a former PT member) read over your full dossier at least 2 weeks before it’s due, and heed their advice
• Don’t go up early without a “need”
• The obvious stuff (publish, get grants, teach well)
Final thoughts– staying competitive

• “Never think of any job as your last.”
• Solicit honest, direct feedback and mentoring
• You are your own best advocate– create opportunities
  • Get yourself invited for seminars
  • Award nominations
  • Press releases
• Don’t let the job eat you up
Thank You!