

COLLEGIAL ADVICE FOR ASSISTANT
PROFESSORS

Hints for Success and Stress Reduction

as an

Assistant Professor at UC Davis

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May 1990

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FORWARD

Prior to preparation of this document, I sent a request to members of the Faculty Women's Research Support Group for words of advice they would give and suggestions of concerns that should be addressed. The 40 responses received and information I have collected since coming here in 1973 were incorporated. Three drafts were sent out for review. Comments and suggestions were received from 25 people—nineteen of whom were ladder ranked faculty (assistant, associate, and full professors).¹

What I have tried to do is share in-house information, making suggestions for such things as keeping track of professional endeavors, setting priorities, choosing committees on which to serve, and recognizing warning signs that could influence progress up the academic ladder. I hope that the information will be of use to you during your time as an assistant professor.

¹*The original printing and distribution of Collegial Advice for Assistant Professors was paid for by a grant through Affirmative Action Funding.*

2 PRIORITIES

Your professional responsibilities include teaching, research, and service. The University schedule is set up primarily around its teaching mission, and teaching responsibilities are an immediate demand on your time. Research includes all forms of creative activity that are established means for achieving professional recognition in your area of expertise. ***Developing a viable, focused, and productive research program is essential to having a successful career as a UC Davis professor.*** Because service includes administrative duties, professional service and public service, requests for service commitments come from many directions.

In order to achieve successful academic advancement, assistant professors must focus their efforts on the primary responsibilities of productive research and effective teaching. Any service responsibilities that are accepted should be done well. The level of service activity should not interfere with meeting the primary research and teaching responsibilities. In fact, ***heavy service commitments may interfere with the advancement of assistant professors.***

According to the AP Manual, it is theoretically possible to obtain merit increases as a result of “outstanding” performance in teaching and service with acceptable research. In practice, however, it is very difficult to obtain outstanding ratings in both teaching and service when there is a belief that the research quality and/or quantity is not “good enough.” Consequently, ***the safest assumption to make is that nothing substitutes for having a high quality research program with a consistent record of good to excellent teaching.*** Establishing and maintaining a quality research program must be your primary professional priority in order for UC Davis (or any research institution) to be the right place for you. For a fulfilling professional life, it is important that the goals and focus of the institution fit well with your professional priorities.

The AP Manual provides descriptions of types of appointments, timing of career advancement or review actions, and information expected for inclusion in personnel packets. The following three sections will give hints and suggestions for setting and maintaining a good balance with research, teaching and service responsibilities.

3 RESEARCH

It is essential for you to start early and push hard to focus energy and time towards becoming a respected and productive scholar. A first step in this direction is to set aside blocks of time for work on your research activities. If other commitments threaten to infringe on these blocks of time, then reduce the other commitments. In working towards the goal of successful professional advancement at UC Davis, absolutely nothing is more important than developing a viable, ongoing research program. *You are your strongest advocate. Convey your enthusiasm for research verbally, but demonstrate it via your professional choices.*

Quality of research is more important than quantity, but most departments have expectations of quantity that are often unstated and not fixed. In order to obtain a sense of the most current standards, it can be helpful to talk to the most recently tenured members of your department (or program) or of departments in research areas that are closely related to yours. In some cases, the recently tenured faculty members might be willing to let you see their curriculum vitae and/or (edited) promotion letters. The latter are not available in many departments.

You are the best person to offer an overview of your research program. At the time of review, provide your chair or program director with a carefully prepared research statement. Include brief descriptions of your creative accomplishments and their significance or relevance to other work. It is also important to include indication of research in progress as well as future plans. Your statement should make it clear that you are actively engaged in an ongoing research program about which you are enthusiastic. The information you provide can be useful to the chair during preparation of the departmental letter that will be forwarded with your packet.

If publication is the usual outlet for your creative endeavors, be aware that not all publications are alike. In many disciplines, short book reviews are fairly insignificant contributions which are considered as service to the profession rather than scholarship. The weight assigned to papers appearing in conference proceedings may be lower than that assigned to work appearing in refereed journals. You need to ask your department chair for clarification of the current weightings and expectations. Regular consultations with the chair or program director can be useful for obtaining information such as changes in evaluation criteria. If the chair or

program director is either not helpful or not supportive, consult with supportive senior faculty in your department or in a closely related department. If you experience persistent problems in relating to your chair, you may want to talk to your Dean.

Another activity that can contribute to professional stature is work within professional societies. Although involvement in professional societies is service, it can have direct benefits for your research posture. Since research is judged by peer review, giving invited lectures, refereeing, and reviewing can lead to increased visibility. Increased visibility, in turn, can open the doors to collaborative work with co-researchers who, in the process, become familiar with your work. Finally, citations and awards from professional organizations provide visible evidence of your own academic excellence, while enhancing the university's image at the same time. Needless to say, all such forms of visibility are helpful in obtaining grant money which can benefit your research.

The need for funding varies significantly among different fields. If funding is needed for development of your research program, one of your first tasks should be to apply for intramural and/or extramural funding. On this campus, there are special funds available to faculty during their first two years. If you are in an area where extramural funding is available and needed, successful grant applications lead to enhancement of your research and provide concrete evidence of professional recognition which can impress review committees.

We conclude this section with mention of a few benchmarks that are by no means all inclusive. By the time of your tenure review, you should have publications or results of creative activity beyond the original dissertation topic. Most of your published work should be refereed and should have appeared in a variety of well established outlets (journals, monographs, exhibitions, etc.). Some of your publications should be sole authored or first authored. If your research area is one in which extramural funding is available or necessary, you should have been in active pursuit of such funding.

4 TEACHING

Teaching can be a most enjoyable and personally satisfying part of your responsibilities. The fundamental expectation in this area is that each of us is a good to

excellent teacher. Failure to meet that expectation might result in lack of professional advancement. On the other hand, meeting it certainly will not be sufficient – by itself – for promotion. In other words, since being a good to excellent teacher is a normal expectation, being a very good teacher is essentially “no big deal.” *It is especially true that ranking as an excellent teacher does not substitute for having a high quality research program*, though it may enhance your research and often goes hand-in-hand with it.

There are many endeavors that fall into the realm of teaching. These include but are not limited to course instruction at the undergraduate and graduate levels, curriculum/course development, advising, writing textbooks and preparation of class materials. For an extensive description of teaching related contributions, see the “Annual Call.”

Since teaching is one of our primary responsibilities and it is one of the missions of the University of California, it is important that we strive for high quality teaching. The Teaching Resources Center provides many services designed to assist faculty with their efforts to achieve excellence in teaching: It can also help you address any problems with your teaching, swiftly and decisively.

An additional source of help with teaching can come from supportive colleagues in the form of observations, consultation concerning exams, and discussions related to the mechanics of a course. At the time of tenure review, comments that colleagues can offer your chair or program director concerning quality of teaching and level of expectation can be an important supplement to student evaluations for support of a claim of excellence in teaching. The way to get observations and comments is simply to ask colleagues. Good people to ask should become apparent from natural contacts and discussions in informal settings.

It is important to keep in mind that personnel packets are supposed to contain documentation of teaching that goes beyond written teaching evaluations from students. Some materials that could be used for this purpose include course syllabi and information sheets, exams which illustrate level of expectation with some indication of how students did on them, a selection of “before” and “after” papers that can be used to show students’ improvement in writing or quality of thought, and copies of explanations of any special materials you designed for use with your classes.

Many faculty choose to spend time on “extras” such as supplementary class

handouts, additional (unscheduled) problem or discussion sessions, solution sets, private consultations, etc. Such things may be done as a matter of personal commitment to quality teaching and it is advisable for you to act upon your own personal standards for excellence in this arena. However, spending time doing little or big extras should be viewed as a personal preference and should never be viewed as a means to increase the weighting of teaching in promotion or advancement considerations.

By the time of your tenure review, you should have had several successful teaching experiences at different levels. Save or collect evidence of teaching successes. These can include synopses of written evaluations from students, unsolicited letters of appreciation from students with whom you have worked, letters from people who have either observed your teaching or attended guest lectures that you have given, and evidence that your students have performed well in subsequent courses or on common finals.

5 SERVICE

This area of professional activity will be discussed at length because it is the one in which we are most often led astray. University service is an important responsibility. It is also an opportunity to interact with members of the university community outside of your department. It is necessary to do service and that the service be done well. There are many endeavors that fall into the realm of service. These include but are not limited to committee assignments (department, Academic Senate, administrative advisory, university wide, search, curriculum review, ad hoc for personnel review, etc.), program development and/or coordination, public speaking, participation in oral exam and/or thesis committees, report writing and/or review, some forms of consulting, and some work through university extension.

While it is your responsibility to contribute service to the professional and academic community, it is essential for your survival to be cautious in making

ing with research and teaching. Once tenured, you will have many years ahead of you to take advantage of the numerous service opportunities that this campus has to offer.

Never say yes to a service commitment immediately upon request. This leaves two choices: “NO”– the one most appropriate for assistant professors during their first two (or more) years – and “I will need to think about it because of the possible time demand.” Some form of the latter response allows time to assess whether or not acceptance is a good idea. Some factors to consider are the charge to the committee, the expected time commitment (per week, per quarter, etc.) and the perceived value of the responsibility. Feel free to consult with several colleagues concerning what they know about the committee and the advisability of agreeing to a requested commitment.

The belief that a service request from a chair should automatically be accepted is a commonly held misconception. It should be clear that beginning assistant professors should not be revising programs, running search committees, and/or writing department curricula. If your chair cannot find other, more established members of the department to do such major projects, then you might agree to do them in lieu of some teaching responsibilities. For example, a one course reduction in your teaching load might be a fair exchange for a particularly heavy service commitment. Until one says yes to the commitment, the conditions under which it will be done are negotiable. But remember, *no amount of service will ever substitute for a publication.* Consequently, you should never accept a heavy service responsibility – regardless of offered compensation – if it will interfere with developing an ongoing, productive and high quality research program. Keep in mind that if a chair demonstrates poor judgment by asking you to overextend in the service area, you need not demonstrate poor judgment by accepting. It is your career that will be put at risk by over commitment. If it is necessary to say no to your chair, do it tactfully! One approach is to say something to the effect of, “I would like to help out, but my desire to make progress on my current research project(s) necessitates that I not take on such a service responsibility, at this time.”

Faculty either on joint appointments or hired specifically for program development need to be especially careful to limit the number of additional responsibilities accepted. Joint appointments logically lead to a higher level of departmental service because of the natural desire to contribute to each unit. During a time of

heavy program development, it is best to avoid all other official service commitments.

Prior to accepting service commitments, it is a good idea to have established limits or goals concerning the number of such commitments you are willing to make and/or the amount of time per week you are willing to devote to service. If you are a member of a traditionally underrepresented group, it is likely that service requests, official and unofficial, will be more frequent and persistent. The possibility of extra demands makes the setting of personal limits on official acceptances particularly important. Reasonable limitations allow room to respond positively to a few extra unofficial requests. Keep in mind that the kind of professional life we live becomes a model that many of our students will either want to emulate or avoid.

A beginning assistant professor might participate in one departmental committee along with doing some undergraduate advising. This might translate to 1-2 hours of “official” university service per week. A time demand that is difficult to anticipate is “unofficial” advising of students in your classes who encounter personal or academic difficulties. In addition, keep in mind that there may be extra requests for outside lectures, seminars, attendance at special functions, etc., that will take additional time. A second or third year assistant professor might add service on a committee of the Academic Senate. This might increase the university service commitment to a total of 2–4 hours per week. Note that there are several university committees that average up to 10 hours of work per week. In addition, chairing a committee is more time consuming than being a member. Adding service commitments very slowly allows you to determine the impact of each commitment on your efforts to meet research and teaching responsibilities without having either suffer.

By the time of your tenure review, a good to excellent record of service is one which consists of several well met commitments in different arenas. By keeping track of everything you do, you should be able to describe a consistent record of ongoing, high quality service.

6 RECORD KEEPING

In order to present a relatively complete overview of your professional accomplishments, it is important to keep good records related to your contributions. Accurate ongoing record keeping can do much to lessen the stress of putting together a personnel packet.

An easy way to have a record of actions and accomplishments is to maintain a simple 3×5 card file system having a section heading for each general professional commitment area. Many people prefer to use a computer disk with a file for each heading. Some obvious headings are teaching; research publications; public service publications; lectures; service with separate subcategories for department, Academic Senate, university and professional societies; and advising. If you spend a lot of time doing unofficial advising or conferencing, you should keep track of that time. Each professional activity undertaken can be recorded simply on the cards with basic information that should include at least the title and date. The cards should be filed in chronological order. The same card file can be kept from year to year. This system can lead to quick compilations of lists of service done, lectures given, classes taught, publications, grants applied for, grants received, etc. Perhaps even more useful is the quick overview it gives you concerning where your time is being spent. The thickness of the cards under a particular heading indicates, at a glance, where your priorities appear to be focused.

It is important to keep track of your professional growth and development and to be able to compile the information quickly. If you are not the sort of person who sits down periodically to keep files up to date, at least keep a box labeled “works and praise.” Items to be collected include, but are not limited to, letters of acceptance for submitted manuscripts, offprints, copies of submitted grant proposals, letters of commendation that are clearly beyond the perfunctory thank you, letters from students, complimentary citations of your work that have appeared in the work of others, etc. It is a good idea to review and order the contents of your documentation box at reasonable intervals of time. Copies of a selection of such documentation should be included in a supplemental (“optional”) binder as part of your personnel packet for merit increases and should be retained for the tenure review. Note that materials reviewed for the “first” merit increase (See the AP

Manual) are reconsidered at the time of tenure review. The tenure decision is based on an assessment of your professional accomplishments from the start of your employment at UC Davis.

7 MENTORSHIP

Potential mentors are senior people who are knowledgeable about the system and who are willing to share that knowledge while being supportive and encouraging. Developing a mentor relationship with a faculty member who is experienced in personnel matters and who has established a successful research program can be very beneficial. If you prefer to seek mentors who are outside of your department, make sure that some of them are in closely related research areas. The Office of Academic Affairs offers a Faculty Mentor Program that is designed to assist interested faculty in finding mentors. On a less formal level, you can start building a mentorship relationship just by asking questions of colleagues and noting their availability for discussions. The level and type of responses you get to your questions will indicate those faculty who are better at being helpful.

Presenting papers at scholarly meetings can lead to contacts with senior people who are very experienced and successful in seeking and obtaining extramural funding. Initially, be open to collaborating with an established professional colleague on research and grant applications. This can be a beneficial and enlightening extension of the usual mentoring situation and can increase the feelings of excitement about research activity. The intellectual stimulation of collaborative research makes such efforts worth pursuing independent of extramural funding consideration.

8 A TWO YEAR “RULE”

Your initial appointment is for two years with consideration for reappointment due after one year of service. If the first reappointment is not a tenure review, it is based on a judgment of satisfactory professional progress and is relatively automatic. Thus, the first two years can be used as a time for adjustment to your new position. Unfortunately, this information isn't enough to prevent some feelings of doubt or concern regarding success.

When some of your colleagues were asked for suggestions for what to include in this guide, several of them reported either having experienced doubts about the move here or having new colleagues with such doubts. There was striking similarity in how they successfully dealt with the natural feelings of transition turmoil. A descriptive title for this successful tactic is “a two year rule.”

In order to devote your professional energy and time towards developing into a respected, professional, productive scholar who loves to do research and work with students, it is important to be free from the inner turmoil associated with career movement decisions. Rather than having an ongoing, from day one, debate concerning a possible career change, set aside a date when you will allow time specifically for the purpose of deciding whether UC Davis is the best place for you. The key is to pick a date or time period that is at least two years after your arrival. It takes at least that long to make a reasoned decision. There are many factors, both personal and professional, that need to be weighed. Is the professional atmosphere conducive for optimal research productivity? Do the department and campus climate offer ample opportunities for intellectual exchanges? Are there appropriate avenues for obtaining research support? Is there good potential for establishing a satisfying personal life? Do you, on the whole, like it here and feel valued? If the answer to any of these questions is an unambiguous no, then UC Davis may not be the right place for you.

For completeness, we close this section with mention of a delicate matter. It is practically impossible to receive tenure in a department where you have no professional support. There are several warning signs that may suggest “tough going ahead.” These include the repeated minimizing or belittling of your professional accomplishments and the reinterpretation or ignoring of positive letters of evaluation or other forms of commendation of your work. Such signals suggest that you will have a fight on your hands. While a fight can lead to the outcome you seek, you need to decide whether the energy expenditure is worth the potential gain. No one can make this decision for you. It needs to be based on your goals and priorities since the political situation may have little to do with you or your professional efforts.

9 A FIVE YEAR PLAN

Make a reasonable but comprehensive 5-year schedule for research, publishing, and grant seeking. As a part of that plan select some goals with long term payoff and some short term goals that will demonstrate your ability to become a productive research scholar. It is important to establish a good track record. Having a clear picture of where you think you want to be five years from now can give you a better basis for making professional decisions than immediate surroundings and demands.

Once you have a reasonable 5-year schedule, put it where you can see it every day as a reminder. No matter what, try to stick to reaching your goals. By anticipating that there will be plenty of interference, you can act to minimize its effect. The visibility of the plan can help you focus your professional efforts.

10 QUOTES FROM YOUR COLLEAGUES

Prior to the preparation of this document, the author asked some of your colleagues to share words of advice that they thought should be included. Many of their responses have been incorporated into this document. We close with what some of your colleagues said.

“Discipline your skills and energy and time toward developing into a respected, professional, productive scholar who loves to do research and loves to work with students. An inability to do this in a relatively short time means you have chosen an inappropriate profession, the wrong field, the wrong campus, or the wrong period of your life.”

“Put impressions on ‘hold.’ Culture shock in coming into a new environment is both extreme and insidious. Give the place a chance – and then another. (Personally, it takes me years to settle in.)”

“Set priorities for research and publications and keep them. Believe in what you choose to accomplish academically and share that belief with others. Seek your own research funding, at first locally and then nationally.”

“Aim early and push hard for your research focus. Figure how selfish you need to be to achieve that goal and then be twice as selfish, if you can. Network with other assistant professors.”

“Please focus on your research. Avoid overloading yourself with committee meetings. Keep your sense of humor and have fun off campus.”

“Do at least one conference paper a year. It is an enforced deadline that helps you get material together that can be worked up into a publication. Also, you may meet potential outside evaluators for your tenure process.”

“Believe in yourself. If you’re finding things tough, chances are that it is because they are tough – not that you’re inadequate. Remember there really is more to life than UCD.”

“Find out who are the helpful staff members in your department, those who can get you through and around the bureaucracy. Try not to take on many extra duties, e.g., independent studies, during the first year! Find a mentor/advisor.”

“Learn to say ‘no’ to requests for committee duties. Talk to your department chair to get his/her support for saying ‘no.’ Organize your time so that you make yourself very available during certain scheduled hours and unavailable during other times.”

“Set aside part of each working day for research. Include both the gathering of data and an interpretive sentence or two. Carry a small book with you at all times to write down important things regarding research and the politics of the University. Don’t be afraid to ask questions.”

“Write many good grant proposals and get funded. Be a good teacher. Leave politics out, unless it is your subject.”

“Keep in close contact with the subject bibliographer in the University Library who purchases materials in support of your teaching and research. Inform that person in a timely manner about your needs, especially if it will take awhile to process your requests. Your teaching

will go smoother and so will your research.”

“Be very, very selective in participating in non-research related activities at the university, especially if you are a minority female. Committees and other worthwhile but time consuming activities can rob you of valuable time during the first three years on campus.”

“There isn’t enough time to do everything. You should think of time you are willing to devote to service as personal time you are willing to give up. You may still decide to do it, but don’t trade in teaching or research time to do so.”

11 CONCLUSION

As an assistant professor, you can get so caught up in worrying about criteria for advancement that you lose sight of the fact that you really want to do both research and teaching. You are here because you have the potential to be a successful and productive faculty member. The Davis campus is one where accomplishments in several areas are encouraged and appreciated. So, do what you love and love what you do! Laugh a lot and enjoy all the professional rewards that are available. If you get to feeling isolated or confused, seek support and encouragement from your colleagues. There are many of us, and many of us have been where you are now.

Good Luck!