

The Critical First Year: Making the Transition to College Teaching

Mei-Yan Lu

Making transitions is a subject rarely taught in graduate schools. While working on doctoral degrees, graduate students are trained to conduct research, and occasionally doctoral students may gain experience in teaching as a teaching assistant. Depending on the institution, however, the process of improving teaching for graduate assistants is often haphazard and not systematically reinforced.

Taking on a new academic appointment triggers changes in an individual's life and in the lives of family and friends, as well as in the institution that offers the position. Families often must relocate, homes need to be bought and sold, spouses seek employment, and children must be settled in new schools.

This discussion focuses on making the transition to a tenure-track faculty position at a university that emphasizes teaching. The academic aspects of the transition are primarily emphasized. In particular, topics to be considered before accepting an academic appointment include:

1. Discuss faculty expectations during the interview process. What are the major areas of evaluation, such as excellence in teaching and publication quantity and quality?
2. Pursue questions related to conditions of employment, specifically address issues related to performance expectations, review process, teaching load, research support, committee assignment, salary, benefits, insurance, housing, travel, and professional development opportunities.
3. Seek advice from experienced college professors and administrators.

A useful resource list has been included as Figure 1, and conditions of employment to consider have been presented in Figure 2.

Many new faculty are concerned about the lack of a coherent tenure system in many universities (Eugene, Sorcinelli, & Austin, 2000). Nevertheless, the tenure review time frame for most universities ranges from four to six years. During the first year of the tenure track position, faculty members need to focus on the evaluation process so as to establish a foundation for progress toward tenure and promotion. There are typically three areas in reviewing tenure-track candidates for tenure and promotion: teaching; publications, presentations, and grant writing; and committee and community service.

To understand the relative importance of each area in the tenure/promotion review, new faculty need to check with their own institutions. For example, universities that are traditionally research oriented (Stanford University, Arizona State University, Penn

Mei-Yan Lu is a Professor of Instructional Technology at San Jose State University .

State, University of Texas at Austin) may have a lighter teaching load and expect more publications and getting more external funding. Four-year comprehensive universities that have a heavier teaching load, such as San Jose State University (SJSU) and San Francisco State University, tend to emphasize teaching. For example, on SJSU's 5-point Likert-type scale student evaluation survey, the university mean is 4.2. New faculty are expected to have teaching evaluations at or above the university or college average.

1. Teaching assignment

Most universities which focus on teaching have a heavy faculty teaching load. For example, at San Jose State University a typical teaching load for a semester is four 3 credit hour/unit classes. This means each faculty member has to teach 12 units a semester. During the first year, faculty members may be assigned to teach courses they have not taught before, and it is not uncommon to find a faculty member express surprise at the amount of time spent preparing for classes, and most wish that they had more time for scholarship or research (Murray, 2000).

Another key area is student evaluation. At San Jose State University, the measurement instrument is called SOTE (Student Opinion on Teaching Effectiveness). Sample items in the SOTE survey include:

- "The instructor gives organized presentation."
- "The instructor uses class time effectively."
- "The instructor is available outside of the class."

Faculty need to be familiar with the items included in the student evaluation survey before writing syllabi and make sure to cover these areas during the semester.

2. Publication, Presentations and Grant Writing

A critical first step for new faculty is the creation of a meaningful, substantive research agenda, and to then create a network of professional colleagues to empower that agenda. Professional conferences are good places to build and enhance a professional network. But, because many universities may have limited travel funds, new faculty members may consider presenting their research findings in local, regional or national conferences. New faculty can also volunteer to serve as reviewers for presentation proposals, members of editorial boards, and officers in professional organizations to enhance contacts and build professional experiences.

On the average, it takes about one to two years to have a research paper published in a blind-reviewed refereed journal, and as a result, it is critical to focus on writing during the first year. First year faculty are strongly encouraged turn a doctoral dissertation into several publications in professional refereed journals. New professors need to select a suitable referred journal, follow the writer's guidelines, revise the dissertation based upon those guidelines, and go through the review process. Often, blind-reviewers are full-time faculty or administrators who volunteer their time to serve as reviewers. As a

result, the turn-around time may take anywhere from three to six months.

Grant writing is another important area, but one in which recent Ph.D.'s have usually had little experience. Two strategies are recommended to get started on grant writing: first, begin with internal grants. Many universities offer grants such as research incentive grants, mini grants, affirmative action grants, and research grants for faculty development. The requirements are generally anywhere from one to three pages, and it is a good place to begin to understand the grant application process. Second, volunteer as a grant reviewer. When faculty members have a chance to present at professional conferences, they will often meet officers or staff from funding agencies such as the State Department, the National Science Foundation (NSF), and the U.S. Department of Education. They constantly look for qualified reviewers to serve on their grant proposal review panels and boards. The experience to serve as a reviewer is invaluable to understand the review process.

3. Committee Work and Community Service

How to select committees to serve on is a common question for most new faculty. Often, faculty are expected to serve on committees on various level such as departmental, divisional, college level, university level and off-campus (community). To find out what these university committees entail and the time requirements, new faculty should consult their Academic Senate, administrators, and experienced senior faculty in the college.

Becoming a member of a committee has several advantages: First, it is a good opportunity to meet and work on projects with colleagues from other disciplines. Second, it's a great venue to understand and contribute to faculty governance. Third, it paves the way to future leadership.

Community services and special projects are good ways to contribute to higher education, with one example being outreach. The Department of Instructional Technology at San Jose State University, for instance, started a masters degree program that was delivered on site at a local community college.

In summary, a new beginning involves letting go of the past, a personal redefinition, adjusting to new roles, and accepting a new reality. Transitions to a new beginning involve new understandings, new attitudes, new values, and most of all, new identities. For some, transitions may bring tough times; for others transitions may be exhilarating and renewing, but after all, these are the all important and live-changing events that make life exciting, challenging, and rewarding.

References

- Murray, J. P. (2000). *New Faculty's Perceptions of Academic Work Life*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Sacramento, California.
- Eugene, R., Sorcinelli, M., & Austin, A. (2000). *Heeding new voices: Academic careers for a new generation*. Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education.

FIGURE 1

Useful resources

Websites

Preparing Future Faculty National Office
URL: <http://www.preparing-faculty.org/>

National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment
URL: <http://www.ed.psu.edu/cshe/htdocs/research/NCTLA/nctla.htm>

Getting Started In Research At Stanford, An online Guide for new faculty and oother researchers
URL: <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/dor/newfac.html>

Articles/books

Caplan, P. J. (1993). *Lifting a ton of feathers: A woman's guide for surviving in the academic world*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Debelius, M., & Basalla, S. E. (2001). *So what are you going to do with that?: A guide for M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s seeking careers outside the academy*. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux.

Heiberger, M. M., & Vick, J. M. (1996). *The Academic Job Search Handbook*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.

Erickson, C., & Rodriquez, E. (1999). Indiana Jane and the Temples of Doom: Recommendations for enhancing women and racial/ethnic faculty's success in Academic. *Innovative Higher Education*, 24(2), p149-68.

Kreeger, K. Y. (1999). *Guide to nontraditional careers in science*. Philadelphia, PA: Taylor and Francis.

Lanks, K. W. (1996). *Academic environment: A handbook for evaluating employment opportunities in science*. Washington, DC: Taylor and Francis.

Lease, S.H. (1999). Occupational role stressors, coping, support, and hardiness as predictors of strain in academic faculty: An emphasis on new and female faculty. *Research in Higher Education*, 40(3), 285-307.

Newhouse, M. (1997). *Cracking the academic nut: A guide to preparing for your academic career*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

Reis, R. (1997). *Tomorrow's professor: Preparing for academic careers in science and engineering*. New York: IEEE Press.

Robins-Roth, C. (1998). *Alternative careers in science: Leaving the ivory tower*. San Diego: Academic Press.

Schaffer, W. (1999). *High-tech careers for low-tech people*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press.

Toth, E. (1997) *Ms. Mentor's impeccable advice for women in academia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.

Verba, C. (1997). *Scholarly pursuits: A practical guide to academe*. Cambridge, MA: Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Office of Student Affairs.

FIGURE 2

Conditions of Employment: Items for Discussion during interview and negotiation

I. Condition of appointment

- Academic rank
- Academic tenure or how obtained
- Service credit toward tenure/promotion application
- The process and procedure to be followed for assessing the performance of the tenure-track faculty

II. Compensation

- Base salary
- Retirement plan
- Other sources of compensation (e.g. Foundation support, summer teaching)
- Consulting opportunities

III. Insurance

- Health
 - Spouse
 - Dependents (to what age)
 - Major Medical (to what limits)
- Life
- Disability
- Professional liability
- Travel insurance (accidental death or disability)
- Automobile (university owned): Does university insurance cover rental cars for traveling on university business?

IV. Housing

- Any housing assistance provided?
- Special home loan programs for employees?

V. Leave

- Sabbatical leave
- Difference in Pay
- Professional leave
- Personal leave

VI. Professional development

- Opportunities?
- Length
- Support?

VII. Moving expenses

VII. Financial counseling

IX. Family use of facilities and payment of services

1. Tuition (e.g., waiver?)
 2. Gym, swimming pool
 3. Babysitting
 4. Day care for minor children
-