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Making the Transition from Doctoral Student to Assistant Professor

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You have made it through the doctoral program. You are a PhD. You finally have "Dr." in front of your name. Now, it is time to move into a productive academic career—no longer kowtowing to your committee and other faculty. Your job is well within your comfort zone. After all, you have done plenty of research and teaching in the doctoral program. This job is more of the same—with a bigger paycheck. At last, you are in control of your career, making real money ... and life is looking up. Think again.

While much has been written on the skill sets necessary to succeed as a doctoral student, less attention has been given to helping doctoral students' transition into life as assistant professors. In our experience, many doctoral students view their program as the biggest hill to climb—and receive a rude awakening when their first job proves to be a greater challenge than they anticipated. Rather than expressing enthusiasm for their new jobs, these fresh assistant professors often look back fondly on the simplicity of doctoral life as they decipher expectations, navigate obstacles, and deal with the complexities of their lives on the tenure-track.

A number of stress points make academic jobs unique (Sorcinelli, 1992): (1) Not enough time; (2) Inadequate feedback and recognition; (3) Unrealistic self-expectations; (4) Lack of collegiality; and (5) Balancing work and outside life. These stress points come as a source of consternation for many fresh assistant professors. Some even decide relatively late in the process after reaching a level of frustration—that an academic career is not for them. This is unfortunate. We

write this commentary as a retrospective view of this transition—in the hope that it will complement a doctoral student's prospective view. While the commentary will sensitize students to the difficulties of academic life, our intent is not to dissuade students from this career choice. The life of a faculty member can be very rewarding in terms of flexibility, pursuing knowledge, and developing students. However, along with these intrinsic rewards comes the harsh reality of assistant professors' lives, and the better prepared students are for this reality, the better their ability to cope.

The three classical aspects of an academic job are REsearch, Service to the university and scholarly communities, and Teaching, known collectively as the REST duties. To understand retrospectively how faculty perceive REST, we interviewed 16 colleagues: five assistant professors pursuing tenure, two assistant professors that were denied tenure and are looking for a new academic job, one assistant professor that was denied tenure and left academia, five associate professors, and three senior scholars. A list of questions was formulated to identify surprises and strategies during the transition from a doctoral student to an assistant professor. Below, we have organized these discussions and provide advice through them to assist future assistant professors.

How Do I Make a Successful Transition?

Our colleagues agreed that the skill sets required to be a good doctoral student differ from those required to be a good

professor in substance and intensity. They identified five salient differences: (1) Lack of clarity, (2) Demands, (3) Pressure, (4) Self-motivation, and (5) Politics.

A Lack of Clarity in Goals

Assistant professors lack clear milestones to mark the path to tenure. While many doctoral students face difficulty in identifying and refining their research, they (usually) have some kind of support structure that provides valuable guidance about where to direct their energy. In the dissertation stage, committee members and particularly the advisor have made a commitment to help. Often, junior faculty do not receive such formal support or guidance. In some cases, senior faculty provide inconsistent messages about the relative importance of teaching, research, or service—leaving junior faculty with unclear guidance about where to direct their efforts.

Many schools do not do a very good job of mentoring junior faculty—and thus, you go from what ought to have been an environment with much mentoring (PhD school) to one with none (faculty). [*Associate Professor*]

Goals/objectives are less clear/more difficult to identify: As a graduate student, things are clear—you know you need to pass the comprehensive exam, finish your dissertation, etc. As a professor, the requirements for tenure may not be very clear (and the tenure review several years away), you may be given mixed messages on the importance of teaching, service, etc. Goal setting, prioritizing your time, etc. can be challenging. [*Recently Tenured Associate Professor*]

Competing Demands for Your Attention

Assistant professors have more demands placed on them than doctoral students. Unlike doctoral study where (say) single-minded focus on a dissertation project is not only appropriate but also a recipe for success, assistant professors find themselves suddenly confronted with a new repertoire of obligations related to juggling multiple research projects, teaching more courses and service.

I have many more demands on my time. From graduate student advising, to university commitments, to new preps for teaching (I teach 4 preps this year plus an extra-comp course), I am never caught up. You have to learn to manage your time well and prioritize. [*Recently Tenured Associate Professor*]

I had to find out about the administrative matters, and some 'officekeeping' (equivalent of housekeeping) matters in addition to the two major responsibilities in the areas of research and teaching. During the graduate student time, the goal and other secondary objectives are clear and the path is somewhat clear. But as a professor the goals are less specific (of course there are tenure requirements and teaching evaluation objectives). [*Denied Assistant Professor*]

Unrelenting Pressure to Produce

Assistant professors feel more pressure—due to increasingly stringent tenure requirements juxtaposed with tougher publication standards. In many cases the responsibility for courses and initiatives falls fully on the new faculty member—rather than “a superior” as in the case of doctoral study. Even if one meets service and teaching requirements, tenure depends on publication.

Tenure is not a fun process. Even with it complete, I feel amazing amounts of internal pressure to continue to perform at a high level. Across all business disciplines, tenure standards are going up. [*Recently Tenured Associate Professor*]

Self-Motivation is a Necessity

Lacking clear goals, being confronted by competing demands, and having to work under pressure to produce means that assistant professors must be more self-motivated than doctoral students. Assistant professors often lack institutional mechanisms around which to structure to their lives. For example, where doctoral students have markers such as comprehensive exams or proposal defenses to mark transitions, assistant professors receive often nebulous annual reviews of their progress towards tenure. Generally

speaking, senior faculty do not look over assistant professors' shoulders to make sure that their inputs in the form of time and energy spent on research, teaching, and service required to earn tenure are commensurate with outputs required to earn tenure. Consider the following quotes:

You can do nothing for a long time and nobody will notice until an entire year goes by. [*Senior Scholar*]

It's up to you to self-manage your areas of weakness: One of the biggest challenges is that you have much less of a 'safety net' to help you manage the things that get you personally into trouble. . . . When we are doctoral students, if we're lucky there are [who] faculty know us very well, are aware of those things that tend to trip us up, and provide us with constructive feedback, support, suggestions, etc. that help us deal with these issues. As a new faculty member, we are expected to 'self-manage'—there is no handholding and often minimal feedback. [*Recently Tenured Associate Professor*]

For grad students there is a support network of other grad students and faculty advisors. As a professor that network is much less concrete. Of course you can still reach out to your advisors, but you are no longer their first priority—you have been replaced by new grad students. Your cohort of fellow grad students are all busy getting settled into their new positions and starting on their own careers. If you are really lucky you will find a position with a supportive faculty and administration, but from what I've seen those opportunities are few and far between. [*Denied Assistant Professor*]

All Politics Are Local

To navigate their workplace, assistant professors must develop political skill. Some assistant professors find themselves engaged in hallway talk on people and politics—something most doctoral students are not involved in. Even if students understood the politics where they earned their degree, at a new institution, the rules of the game are different, and unique to their new employer.

Becoming politically astute is necessary, as understanding personalities, power, and resources are sometimes required to be successful.

In most cases, grad students are below the fray of politics—junior faculty are not. Being aware and keeping your mouth shut are important skills to learn :) [from someone who learned them the hard way!!] [*Associate Professor who was denied tenure at the first school*]

Succeeding as a grad student is like being a junior officer on a ship. If your Captain knows what he/she is doing the trip will be relatively smooth and predictable—and a lot of work. You know in advance where you are going and what you have to do to get there. You don't actually have to plan the whole trip, just the last 1/4 of it. You can stop at most any port and declare that the voyage was successful. Succeeding as a professor is like sailing that ship into new territory and finding a treasure map. The treasure map (i.e., the research literature) shows lots of places that are likely to contain buried treasures. Some treasures are easy to find but not very valuable, some treasures have already been found by other people, some treasures are impossibly hard to find—even though everybody knows they exist, and some treasures are within your grasp—provided that you stocked your ship with the right tools before you ever left the home port. [*Recently Tenured Associate Professor*]

But Were These Differences Unexpected?

While the differences were evident to our interviewees, they may not come as a surprise to many doctoral students. However, some aspects unique to academic life are not as easy to predict. According to our colleagues, surprises include: (1) Publication pressure, (2) Time pressure, (3) Lack of resources, and (4) The random nature of the job.

Surprise: Degree of Pressure Created by the Review Processes

A major disconnect mentioned by our colleagues is pressure felt by assistant professors due to the peer review process. While the mantra to publish or

perish is well-engrained within doctoral programs, what this means is not totally clear until students send papers out for peer review. Used to encouraging feedback from faculty, students are often shocked by the nature and quality of feedback on their paper submissions.

Reviewers are not very nice. Often, reviewers are not very helpful. You have to be thick-skinned and persistent to publish. [*Newly Tenured Associate Professor*]

Despite challenges presented by the peer review process, the need to publish (and publish quickly) cannot be understated:

The constant ticking of the tenure clock is hard. There are not many jobs where you either get promoted or fired after a set period of time. To make things worse, a lot of the process is out of your hands (e.g., the fickle review process). [*Assistant Professor*]

Surprise: Now, Even Less Time

Many of our colleagues were caught off guard by the limited time available to balance diverse expectations. Doctoral students daydream about the absence of assistantship requirements and having full control of their time to teach or research. However, as an assistant professor, (a) the tenure clock is always looming and, (b) there are more demands that take away from focusing on what is important to earn tenure. Our colleagues agreed:

Being 'fragmented' so much in terms of the things that are demanded of you. Try as you may, even the best time management planning can be disrupted and your day can often end up fractured into little pieces. You just need to deal with it and do the best you can. [*Newly Tenured Associate Professor*]

Balancing the demands of teaching, research, and service—with family life. [*Assistant Professor*]

Just finding time to write. [*Assistant Professor*]

Surprise: Scant Resources

Several of our colleagues recalled feeling surprised by the lack of resources available to fund research and teaching.

Faculty are often called upon to do more with less and this bombshell stuns many newly minted PhDs. This thought was reflected in the following quote:

I always thought faculty had great travel budgets, funds for software, and graduate assistant support. This is not a reality. [*Newly Tenured Associate Professor*]

Surprise: More Random than Controlled Life

Our colleagues reported being initially disconcerted by the randomness of academic life. Specifically, assistant professors were surprised by how little control that they have over some of the fundamental aspects of their jobs—for example, whether a paper is accepted or career opportunities.

I wish I had better understood the random nature of an academic career. You are subject to a number of factors that are outside your control. For example, job openings are driven by who retires, who decides to change positions, who doesn't get tenure, fluctuations in student enrollments, college and university budgets, etc. Getting published is influenced to a certain extent by the abilities and conduct of your co-authors, who ends up reviewing your paper, the journal's AE, SE, and EIC, what other papers are submitted, developments in the IS field, etc. This randomness is also present in other industries, of course. Just look at the people affected by the housing crash, for example. However, I would argue that it is more prevalent in academia, at least until you get tenure, then you have a greater degree of certainty. If I were to get philosophical about it, I might say it's a yin and yang kind of thing—the greater randomness and uncertainty of the early years are balanced out by the greater stability and certainty of the post-tenure year. [*Assistant Professor Denied Tenure*]

As a grad student, if I did my research, learn and work diligently, I could make it. But as a professor to be successful, there are many other factors that can influence your success. I wish I knew that when I was a grad student. I wish I knew about the degree of influence senior colleagues

can have on your success. I saw some junior colleagues acting like obedient high school kids in front of the senior colleagues, while I was trying to be more professional. But only now I know why they were behaving like school kids. Academic freedom can be a misnomer if the right people are not there. . . . Just like many of the subjective things that can influence a grad student's success, a faculty career is heavily vulnerable to subjective decisions and politics. I did not hear about the weight of such influences during my grad days although I had two semesters of professional issues seminars and many discussions over these matters during our PhD student association activities. [*Assistant Professor Denied Tenure*]

How Can a Doctoral Student Prepare for This Transition?

To prepare for the next phase of their academic life, all of our colleagues agreed that students must carefully consider their career paths. Doctoral students are trained for academic careers. However, when students do not enjoy research or teaching, they should consider exploring non-academic employment options. An assistant professor who returned to industry told us:

I did not know there wasn't happiness, or a sense of satisfaction, in research-extensive academia for me. I also did not know that I had any real options other than academia. . . . [Students should begin] by having an open, honest discussion with themselves. Do I like research? Am I good at it? Is there satisfaction in publishing? Should I really be in a teaching school? Should I really be in industry, or starting my own business?

For the majority of students, the primary decision they have to make is what type of school to pursue: state or private? Research intensive or teaching intensive? Considering these questions is important because the type of school affects how assistant professors allocate their time and energy. Although dissertation committees or fellow PhD students may offer advice, these questions can only be answered by the students themselves!

Once the student decides what job to pursue, there are strategies that can help students have a more RESTful life. In the next section, we introduce strategies that can be employed right now to prepare for, and avoid surprises at, the first academic job.

Research Strategies

Strategy 1: Anticipate Long Review Cycles and Be Flexible

No author is able to anticipate what will happen after submitting papers to journals. Often, papers that are expected to sail through the review process end up languishing under review for months or receive outright rejections. As papers are prepared, authors should not target specific journals—they may find few alternatives for publication. Instead, papers should be written to appeal to editorial boards at multiple venues and authors should be ready to sequentially submit papers to several outlets until they are accepted for publication.

Strategy 2: Build a Research Portfolio

Earning tenure is not about a specific paper. Instead, it is based on an evaluation of a portfolio of projects, i.e., the sum of faculty work. To build a portfolio requires substantial time, making the projects started as a doctoral student important. One heuristic often used by evaluators of faculty tenure packets is the consistent production of papers from the time of initial employment through tenure. A second heuristic often used by evaluators is whether the tenure packet contains indicators of future research success, i.e., a pipeline. To manage this pressure, students should strive to have not only their dissertation completed, but also additional papers in various stages of completion when they arrive at their first academic position.

Strategy 3: Learn How to Make Time for Writing

As noted above, assistant professors often find they have less time to write

as faculty than when they were doctoral students. Every faculty member has a different approach to writing. For some faculty, scheduling time to write 30-45 minutes a day or two-three longer blocks weekly helps structure their time. Other faculty write when the "muse" strikes. Rather than taking long breaks from research, students should establish, and hold themselves accountable for, goals about writing. When students write on a regular basis, they are more likely to complete their dissertation on time and develop a strong portfolio of projects.

Strategy 4: Economies of Research

Doctoral students need to achieve economies of scale and scope in their research. In terms of scale, students would be well-served to work on projects with clearly defined beginnings and endpoints. In terms of scope, doctoral students should focus on problems with clearly defined boundaries and relevant theories. Students and assistant professors should not try to solve the problems of the world—there is time for that after tenure. Instead, they should identify a few key areas and focus on projects that make a clear impact on those research streams. By narrowing their focus, assistant professors may master theories and methods necessary to push papers through to publication.

Service and Collegiality Strategies

Strategy 1: Network on Campus

Assistant professors should build relationships with colleagues in their department and college. Social activities such as visiting colleagues' offices, going to lunch, or having a cup of coffee extend personal networks. They should get to know their colleagues' research, approaches to teaching, and quirks of campus culture. Through getting to know colleagues, lasting relationships can be built and opportunities for collaboration can be identified.

Strategy 2: Network at Conferences

Students should not rely on faculty bringing visitors to their university as a means to build a network; instead, they should make time to get to know other faculty and doctoral students from other schools at conferences. Informal social connections are a good way of identifying job and research opportunities.

Strategy 3: Choose Service Opportunities Wisely

Choose service that yields long term benefits. A senior scholar suggested that assistant professors use the following heuristics:

- Service should not be neglected, but don't get carried away.
- Some service assignments are really rewarding. Even if you don't do a perfect job, if you put in a little time, it will look like gold. Very often you can

spend a small amount of time and it is really appreciated.

- You should be saying "no" quite regularly or you're taking on too many responsibilities. Some of them are worthwhile (e.g., being AE for MISQ). Some are not (writing chapters for certain encyclopedias or reviewing for conferences you don't want to attend).
- Don't let flattery get you to say "yes." See previous bullet.

Teaching Strategy: Managing Time Efficiently

Our colleagues offered only one teaching strategy: faculty should manage their time efficiently. Faculty differ in how much time they invest in teaching—from six hours to 20 hours a week. Keep in mind that teaching excellence is necessary, but not sufficient, to earn tenure at

nearly every university. As one senior professor said, "Teaching is increasingly important. It pays the bills. But it is a black box and can consume inordinate time. As long as students are not complaining to the dean...."

A Final Note: Prioritization is Key

Prioritizing one's time is crucial, as many assistant professors estimate that they dedicate around 55 hours a week to their job. Guidelines faculty should consider are: using their time carefully, paying attention to their university's values, setting priorities, and then planning out their life. As faculty approach tenure, they should keep in mind that balancing the demands of their professional life with their personal life is important, and there are many different paths towards achieving this goal. ■

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