

Starting Fresh

A primer for new professors on what to expect in the first year on the job

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It helps to be a skilled multitasker when you are starting out in a new faculty position. There is so much to learn about your new job, department, institution, and town.

While much of what you need to know can't be learned until you actually begin work, you can start thinking ahead — about the best way to balance work with your personal life, about teaching, and about the many expectations your new department may have for you in the fall.

Socializing. As a new faculty member, you will meet a great many people. That is exciting for some newcomers, intimidating for others. Whichever camp you fall into, be prepared to socialize in your first months — it's a part of the job. You may even be surprised at the number of invitations. One junior faculty member at a large Midwestern state university said the whirlwind of invitations she received made her feel like a young female character in a 19th-century novel being introduced to society.

Approach the process as a networking and learning experience. Initially it's a good idea to say "yes" to all social opportunities and many professional ones. As the academic year proceeds, you will get a sense of which activities are essential.

You might also consider taking the initiative on the social front. Join a group of new assistant professors that meets for lunch every week, or organize such a group yourself.

Research. Making good progress on your research in the first year is a challenge for many new faculty members. Expect that you will not be as productive when you are learning the ropes as you will be once you have settled in. Budget your time carefully, and guard the hours you do set aside for your research.

Some new faculty members tell us that it is helpful to organize their time by setting aside a day to do nothing but write and do research. And by nothing, we mean nothing — no phone calls, no e-mail messages, no Web surfing.

Try to find a schedule that works for you. You may not be able to accomplish every goal you set for a particular day, or for your first year. But you should get in the habit of being as productive as possible early in your career, as those habits will stay with you as you move forward.

Ph.D.'s in the lab-based sciences face an additional challenge: setting up a lab. That means learning how to be your own boss and a mentor to others. As a new faculty member, you should seek out mentors for yourself who can offer good inside advice on how to get a lab up and running at your institution and how to keep track of your administrative duties and grant deadlines.

You may get conflicting suggestions about whether to hire a postdoc to help you get started in your lab. We've heard some junior faculty members say that a postdoc can begin doing preliminary work in the lab while you focus on teaching your first courses. Others advise against hiring a postdoc until you have your research somewhat established and are ready to start serving as a mentor. Find out what is the norm at your new institution.

In your first year, you might give seminars at university colloquia to meet new colleagues and possible collaborators at your institution. Take the time to attend national and international conferences and make presentations. Now is the time to establish your professional reputation so that you'll have people who can write letters on your behalf when you come up for tenure.

Teaching. Some new faculty members start work with a lot of teaching experience. Others have little or no track record and find they spend an inordinate amount of time preparing lectures. Even if you have lots of classroom experience, you may find that your department needs you to teach courses you never dreamed of teaching and that demand a lot of research and prep time.

We've often heard junior faculty members say that teaching preparation takes as long as you let it take. If you set aside four hours to prepare for a class, it will take you four hours. However much time you set aside, some faculty members suggest doing your prep work just before class so that the time allotted for the task will be limited.

No course will be perfect your first year, no matter how much time you put into it. Do your best, and know that your teaching style will improve as you gain experience.

Administrative/Political Tasks. The three categories of faculty work are research, teaching, and service. The amount of time you devote to the first two will depend somewhat on the institution's mission. But regardless of institution type, all faculty members must do service work for their department or university.

Most departments protect newcomers to the tenure track from too much administrative work during the first year, but some of it is inevitable. One task commonly assigned to new faculty members is undergraduate advising, which can eat up lots of your time. Some professors recommend that you don't do freshman advising until you've been on a campus for more than a year. If you're required to serve as an adviser during your first year, be sure to get a clear picture of the expectations and procedures before meeting with students.

If you're in a department with a master's or doctoral program, think about joining the graduate-admissions committee. That way, you can get a sense of how graduate students are selected and possibly advocate for the admission of students who share your scholarly interests.

Ask to serve on a hiring committee. Other professors might be glad to be relieved of that responsibility, and you might gain some valuable insight into your department's priorities as you listen to your colleagues evaluate candidates. You'll also see the inner workings of a search committee, which can then help you assist graduate students from your own department who are going on the job market.

Try to remain an unengaged observer of departmental politics, and resist the temptation to gossip. Ask other junior faculty members, or use your own powers of observation, to get a sense of whether you should actively contribute at faculty meetings or whether it's best to remain silent the first year.

We once heard a junior faculty member say, "Do your committee requirements well but not too well." Stellar performance on committees, she noted, often results in invitations to join more committees. Make sure that service duties do not overshadow your research and teaching, and discuss it with your chair if you're worried that some of these responsibilities are keeping you from being productive.

Tenure. Start thinking about it as soon as you begin your new position. A good first step: Learn how the process really works at your new institution. Do outside evaluations matter? How are publications and citations evaluated? Does quality count, or quantity? Does teaching matter at your institution? Will your third-year review (often the first step in the tenure process at many institutions) give you insight into how well you're actually doing, or is it just a formality? Conversations with a department chair, a mentor, and/or a recently tenured faculty member can help to elucidate the process.

Begin your new career by keeping track of everything you do as a faculty member — the conference presentations you've given, the articles you've written, the number of students in your classes, the evaluations of your teaching, the names and purposes of committees on which you've served.

When we say keep track of everything, we mean everything. (The other day, a junior professor who spoke at a job-search panel on our campus said that her chair saw the flyer for the event and e-mailed her, "It's great you're doing community service!") That way you will have material from which to draw as you prepare for your third-year review.

Although this list is daunting, it's important to remember that you do have a life outside of your work. Don't neglect family, partners, children, or pets this year, thinking that things will be better next year. Try to have a whole life; it will help you maintain perspective and equilibrium.

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