

Early Career Members

Tips for a Successful Professional Program in Academia: Early Career Perspective

by Jason de Koff

My name is Jason de Koff, and I am an associate professor at Tennessee State University. I engage in teaching, research, and extension (i.e., a three-way split appointment). I earned my Ph.D. in agronomy from Purdue University in 2008. As ASA's 2015 Early Career Professional Award recipient, I have been asked to provide tips for success based on my experiences in academia. Below are reflections on my early career, which serve as my top points of advice for new faculty members.

1. Adapt or Perish

I think the old mantra "publish or perish" still holds true to a certain degree in academia because promotion-and-tenure guidelines require publications; however, I think Darwin's idea of "adapt or perish" holds greater value. What I mean by this is that as an early career professional, you are in uncharted territory, and new stimuli are affecting you on a regular basis for the first year or two. There may be an assortment of potential issues that can and do occur such as a last-minute, unexpected meeting announced by the department chair or a new request for proposals with a 30-day submission window; an equipment failure in the lab or field; a much-needed, but delayed, shipment of important chemicals; a month-long drought after planting or a week of rain on the week you were planning to plant; sick students; or mislabeled samples. These are stimuli that we were relatively shielded from as graduate students but are now in charge of managing as professionals. Those that can adapt well and quickly will be more likely to survive and be deemed the "fit-test" by their department.

If you know you aren't as nimble as others in this arena, this is where a mentor can really help you out. They can help you avoid many of these pitfalls since they have the experience related to your discipline and your institution. Multiple mentors are a great idea because one person is not going to have all of the experiences or advice to help you avoid all issues that may occur. Also, if you are a pessimist, try to cultivate more optimism, and if you are an optimist, cultivate some pessimism. A healthy dose of both can help you to plan for potential problems and manage these problems well when they arise.

2. Lead with Your Strengths

It can be a daunting task to build a program or multiple programs from scratch as an early career professional. Focus



Jason de Koff discussing bioenergy research. Photo courtesy of Tennessee State University.

first on your strengths, which also are usually the things you enjoy doing most (if your strength is Pokémon Go, this might not be the profession for you). This will allow you some time to get acclimated to your new responsibilities while still moving things forward. Once you've had some success, and gained some confidence in the process, you can start moving into areas that are more difficult and take the time to develop these weaknesses into strengths or at least moderate successes. For example, if teaching is your jam, develop or redevelop your courses using whatever hybridizing, course flipping, active learning, pedagogical strengths that are in your wheelhouse. Then start focusing on your research program. You don't want to put it off too long, but you do have to focus on one thing at a time (multi-tasking doesn't really exist), so it might as well be the thing that gets you farther faster.

3. Beware of Time Sucks

Time sucks are those events or individuals that take time away from completing daily objectives. These can include meetings. An effective meeting is one that is well structured with clear objectives and is led by an organized leader. It is important to identify those meetings that will be most effective and of greatest priority and learn to say "no" to meetings that are not. It is also important to keep the service part of your responsibilities in check and proportional to your other responsibilities. It really is OK to say no to a meeting or an additional service request, even one by a department chair, as long as

you make clear your current level of workload or responsibility and how the meeting/service conflicts with it. If you don't set boundaries, you may be "voluntold" more often than your colleagues that set them. At the end of the day, you won't get promoted/tenured based on overachieving in service or winning the perfect meeting attendance award.

Another example of a time suck could be a verbose colleague. We all have at least one colleague that we work with who tends to make the rounds of offices to chat with everyone at a loss of at least 30 minutes of productivity for each victim. One strategy might be to try to avoid the individual (i.e., keep your office door closed, pretend to be on the phone, or hide under your desk), but being straight forward and simply making known the number of things you have to do can go a long way toward letting this person know that you can't engage in a long conversation.

For those who enjoy equations, it can be explained succinctly using the one below:

$$PT_C = (H - n_i t_i) + AT$$

Where your chance for promotion and tenure (PT_C) is directly related to the number of working hours (H) minus the number of times there is a time suck each day (n_i) multiplied by the average duration of the time suck (t_i) plus the amount of additional time you put in after regular business hours (AT). I'm not a modeler, but I can see, based on the equation, that time sucks will take more time away from my family or result in a lower chance of promotion and tenure. One thing has to go...goodbye time sucks.

Some may feel that students can be classified as a time suck. Though they can require more time and hand holding than a research project, I have found student interaction to be the most rewarding part of my work. It is the one activity where I will clear my schedule immediately to answer questions about a homework assignment, discuss projects, or just get to know them better. Those professors that made the greatest impact on me as a student were those who took the time to talk to me and get to know me. When I first began teaching, I was concerned that my course evaluations would suffer because students were not getting their expected grade. However, I was pleasantly surprised to get the results back, particularly the comments, and see that they respected me because I was fair but most of all because I cared. So, indirectly, making time for students will help with promotion and tenure. Unlike a publication, however, students serve as a tangible reminder of the positive impact that I have made every day.

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4. Shameless Promotion

Promoting your research/extension/teaching program can be an extremely useful tool to help you get exposure at the local, state, and national level. After the first three years of working on my program, I had enough material that I could begin promoting what I was doing through the web, social media, and our university. This allowed me to become better known by colleagues across the U.S., by state officials, by Extension agents, and by the general public and to create new opportunities. An example of this was through some work that I had done promoting a lab activity that I had created for youth. A local stakeholder heard about it and emailed me to see if I could turn it into a video that he could use to help educate poor, rural students in his native Pakistan. By working with this stakeholder, we were able to create a video demonstrating a laboratory activity related to bioenergy in his native Urdu language. The video received over 200 views on YouTube in a very short period of time and received great feedback from Pakistani stakeholders. See what I just did there? Yes, I shamelessly promoted a part of my program. But it is a good example of the large synergistic effect that can occur when your program becomes known to more stakeholders. Outlets like social media and the web can really do this quickly. Since social media allows you to tag specific individuals or groups, you can target them with your information and collect their response. Also, tagging your institution in your achievements or creating press releases through your communications department can help keep you on their radar.

The above themes have helped me to successfully wade through the many responsibilities that make up an academic position. I hope these ring true for other early career members (mid- and late-career too!) and help provide future successes.



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