

Navigating a Successful Academic Career in Psychology: Tips and Recommendations for Graduate Students

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Graduate students in clinical, counseling, school, and other fields of psychology frequently are eligible for and interested in pursuing academic careers. Many graduate students, however, may be unsure of, intimidated by, or lack information about this process. The purpose of this article is to provide useful and practical information to doctoral-level graduate students in psychology, who are considering or aspiring to possible academic careers. Three areas were selected for review because in the view of the authors they represent three different phases in the life of a beginning assistant professor. Tips and recommendations are provided for interviewing for academic positions, achieving early career success in academia, and balancing work and home/family obligations.

Graduate students in clinical, counseling, school, and other fields of psychology are frequently eligible for and interested in pursuing academic careers. Many graduate students, however, may feel intimidated by the prospect of a career in academia, and/or lack information about the academic hiring process, as well as issues that typically confront those in academic careers. For example, research suggests that doctoral students in psychology often do not perceive themselves to be adequately prepared for the expectations and realities of academic life, such as navigating the tenure and promotion process (Meyers, Reid, & Quina, 1998). Although there is some information available on this topic in the professional literature (e.g., Darley, Zanna, & Roediger, 2004; Rheingold, 1994; Sternberg, 2004), much of it is scattered among several sources and may not be readily available or within easy access to graduate students in psychology.

The purpose of this article is to provide what we hope is useful and practical information for graduate students

considering or aspiring to possible academic careers in psychology. As early-career academic psychologists ourselves, we were fortunate to receive useful career advice from a variety of friends, mentors, and colleagues. It has been our experience, however, that many graduate students have frequently not been the recipients of helpful and practical advice in this area. In an attempt to address this issue, we offer below tips and recommendations for those graduate students in doctoral psychology programs contemplating a possible career in academia. Our recommendations reflect our collective experiences as academic psychologists, and we believe our experiences may be useful to others interested in pursuing academic careers. Our recommendations may be particularly relevant to those doctoral students who are nearing completion of their graduate studies, who have at least to some degree crystallized their research directions and goals, and who have already begun their academic job search.

In discussing recommendations for aspiring faculty, many different issues could be reviewed, including how to negotiate the decision process to pursue an academic career, how to develop a line of research, how to enhance one's skills in teaching and grant writing, and many other relevant

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topics. Due to space limitations, however, we focus specifically on providing tips and recommendations in three areas: (1) interviewing for academic positions; (2) achieving early career success in academia; and (3) balancing work and home/family obligations. These areas were selected because, in our view, they represent three different phases in the life of a beginning assistant professor. Specifically, issues related to interviewing are paramount when one first begins the academic job search, achieving early career success becomes an important issue once one has received an academic appointment and is pursuing tenure and promotion, and balancing work and family represents an ongoing struggle that will occur both during and after the tenure process. We begin our discussion with tips on interviewing.

Interviewing Tips for Graduate Students

If you have received an invitation to interview for an academic position, you can be confident that your credentials are deemed acceptable by the search committee and that you are a legitimate contender for the job. Your goals for the interview should be to present yourself as a good colleague with potential for excellence in teaching and independence in scholarship. By being cognizant of the issues below, you will likely enhance your chances of engaging in a successful interview and getting a job offer.

Think Carefully About the Kind of Job You Want

Some academic positions emphasize research whereas others emphasize teaching. A clear understanding of the different expectations at research-oriented vs. teaching-oriented programs is critical. Prior to interviewing, you should be clear in your own mind as to how much time and effort you want to expend on each of these activities. For example, if you have little interest in writing grants or publishing refereed journal articles, a faculty position in a doctoral program at a major research university would be a poor match. Taking the time to seriously contemplate which type of faculty position best suits your career aspirations cannot be overstated.

Learn About the Program Before You Interview

Each psychology program has a different mission. It is important that you take some time to learn about the program(s) you are considering. This information should be utilized throughout the interview to illustrate your “fit” with the program, the department, and the institution. For example, it is often desirable to be viewed as an individual who will “reach out” across programs in collaborative pursuits. Keep in mind that frequently the entire department will vote on whom to make an offer. If the search committee believes you are not only qualified for a position in their program and department but also that you are the type of individual who will thrive in both, you are more likely to receive an

offer. For example, chairs of search committees looking to hire psychology professors reported that the fit between a candidate’s background and the position requirements was critical in making hiring decisions (Sheehan, McDevitt, & Ross, 1998).

Never Interview For a Job if You Have No Intention of Accepting it if Offered

Do not use interviews merely as opportunities for practice. If you have no intention of taking a particular job under any circumstances, interviewing for it is unethical, a waste of both your and the search committee’s time, and deprives other candidates of an opportunity to interview for it.

Talk Candidly with Advisors, Current Professors, and Friends to Solicit Their Views

Both before and after interviewing, it is useful to get as many opinions as possible about job openings from current professors, advisors, friends, and colleagues. Although you do not always need to take their words to heart, gathering information about programs and potential colleagues can provide useful insights. If possible, contact former faculty members at the institution(s) where you are interviewing and ask them why they left. Such information can be very enlightening.

Be Sincere

You may be tempted to try to present yourself in a way that makes you “fit” the wants and needs of the program(s) to which you are applying to a degree that is insincere. Don’t. If you do, you (and the institution) will regret it, and probably sooner rather than later. Be straightforward about who you are, what you believe, and why you believe it.

Realize You Are Never Off Stage

During an interview visit, it is often customary for the job candidate and members of the search committee to go out for breakfast, lunch, and/or dinner. Think you are off stage? Think again – you are being watched at all times. As such, be cognizant of proper etiquette and ensure your behavior is appropriate at all times.

Do Not Overestimate Flattery

Members of search committees may sometimes flatter you by telling you how wonderful you are and what a fine addition you would make to their department. Show your appreciation, but don’t take it too seriously. They may well be making similar or identical statements to other candidates. It is in an institution’s best interest to keep as many applicants interested in them as possible during a faculty

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search; that way, in case someone turns them down they can always offer the position to someone else. That said, know how to take a compliment.

Do Not Underestimate the Importance of the Colloquium

The performance of your colloquium is critical and one of the most important determinants of whether or not a job offer will be forthcoming. Members of the search committee and other faculty members will be carefully observing your colloquium to evaluate your research potential, your style and manner of presenting information, and the degree to which your presentation is clear, coherent, and well-organized. An excellent presentation does not guarantee an offer, but a poor performance often seriously jeopardizes one's chances (Iacono, 1981). If this is an area of weakness for you, practice your presentation repeatedly, especially in the presence of others who can provide you with constructive feedback. Keep in mind that the manner in which you answer questions is an important component of the colloquium. The more open minded you are to suggestions, the better you will be perceived. You do not need to know the answer to every question, but you should clearly be able to answer most of them. Also, clearly state the limitations of your study and any shortcomings in your data. Above all, don't get defensive.

Assume There Will Be Technological Problems During Your Colloquium

If your colloquium requires any kind of technology (e.g., LCD projector, laptop computer, overhead projector, etc.), make your needs clear well in advance of your interview. Plan for problems. The authors have been amazed at how often technological difficulties occur during colloquium presentations. If you plan on using an LCD projector, always have overheads available as a back-up in case problems with the projector or computer occur. Also, consider burning your talk and vita onto a disk or storing them on a memory stick. You can never be over-prepared; having these backups ready reflects well on you.

Exhibit a Friendly, Collegial Demeanor

It is useful to remember that one area the search committee and other members of the faculty will be assessing is the degree to which you are someone they would like to work with and see every day. Even the most accomplished scholar or teacher will not be welcome if he/she comes across as aloof or unfriendly. Demonstrating that you have a sense of humor is always a plus, but make sure any attempts you make at humor are appropriate; an interview situation is not the time to make remarks that may be perceived as cutting or "politically incorrect." Remember that

your goal is to ingratiate yourself with potential colleagues, not alienate them.

Ask Many of the Same Questions to Multiple Individuals

The purpose of this is to observe the degree of consistency of responses across multiple individuals. If everyone is saying basically the same things in response to your questions, that is a good sign. If they are not – or are contradicting each other – that is a potential red flag. If this occurs, point out the contradictory or inconsistent statements and ask for clarification.

Enquire About the Relative "Weight" Given to Research, Teaching, and Service in Making Tenure Decisions

Each institution typically awards tenure based upon one's performance in the areas of research, teaching, and service (defined as service to the profession, such as reviewing manuscript submissions to professional journals – and service to the college or university, such as serving on various school committees). Service is typically third on the list, but the relative value and "weight" given to research and teaching can vary enormously depending on the institution. Ask about this and make sure responses are consistent across individuals; if they are not, acknowledge the inconsistent responses and ask for clarification. It is critical that you ask about the requirements for advancement (tenure) from faculty, deans, and (if possible) upper level administrators. At the time of your eventual tenure review, each of these individuals is likely to have a say in your tenure decision, and it behooves the future faculty member to know what each expects.

Make Sure You Have the Opportunity to Talk, in Private, with Both Current Students and Tenure-Track Assistant Professors

Current graduate students and assistant professors are most likely to give you "straight talk" at an institution. As any graduate student knows, students can give you a sense of the climate of a program in a way that faculty cannot. Moreover, other assistant professors "are likely to give you the best idea of the expectations of the department and the reception you would receive if you accepted the job" (Iacono, 1981, p. 222).

Do Not Underestimate the Importance of Location

Remember that you will not only be working in a particular location but will be living there as well. Use internet and other sources to compare cost of living indexes across locations of programs where you are interviewing. When interviewing, do not be shy about asking people about ac-

cess to recreational areas, what they do for fun, and other aspects of the area. For example, if you are a parent or plan to be, you will likely want to know about the quality of public schools in the area.

Realize That There is No Perfect Job

Each academic position has its own unique pros and cons, but even the best of jobs have disadvantages associated with them. If you don't perceive any "negatives" at a particular institution, you are not looking hard enough. Ask faculty to discuss not only what they like, but also what they don't like about their positions and the department and institution in which they are employed. If faculty members identify problems or things they dislike about the program or department, ask them how the faculty or institution is attempting to solve these problems.

Realize That Rejection is Inevitable and Should Not Be Taken Personally

You will likely get rejected by at least some institutions and often not know the precise reason(s) why this occurred. As noted by Iacono (1981): "Rejection letters are inevitable, remarkably uninformative, and sometimes insincere" (p. 224). Additionally, although rejection is never pleasant, try not to take it personally; often the reason you will not receive an offer has less to do with your competency than with a search committee's belief that you simply weren't as good a match as someone else for a particular position.

Know What You Want and Get Everything in Writing

You will never have a better time to negotiate for things you want or need (e.g., summer salary; laboratory space; conference money) than when you receive an offer, so be clear in your mind as to what you want – and what you can live without. Also, ensure that you get everything that was agreed upon in your negotiation in writing. You will want to do this not because of a suspicion that your hiring institution will try to swindle you, but because college and university budgets fluctuate and memories of promises made may fade over time.

Once you get an offer and accept it, celebrate! You have worked hard, and it has (hopefully) paid off in your being hired for a tenure-track position. You will now want to concentrate on getting tenure and promotion to associate professor, and the next section will describe suggestions for easing the transition to faculty life and setting yourself up for success in the pre-tenure years.

Tips for Early Career Success in Academia

The first years of an academic job are often the most stressful. The following suggestions are provided to ease

your transition during the probationary (i.e., pre-tenure) period of your academic career.

Seek Out Mentorship Inside and Outside the University

Many universities will have formal mentorship programs for untenured faculty members. This may include pairing the untenured faculty member with a tenured faculty member, workshops with topics on teaching, preparing the tenure dossier, and grant writing, and/or social gatherings. It is important to recognize that mentoring is critical during the transition to academia and continues to be important throughout the pre-tenure years. Take advantage of university-sponsored mentoring programs for untenured faculty members.

It is also important to recognize the value of multiple mentors and to be open to learning from their experiences. One mentor may be particularly good at helping you navigate departmental and broader institutional policies. Another mentor may share your research interests and be a helpful collaborator as you launch your research program. A third mentor may be helpful in terms of teaching, providing guidance as you design syllabi, prepare classroom activities, and grade student work. A fourth mentor, who is able to achieve a healthy work-life balance (discussed below), can be a role model in learning when to turn down opportunities that are not in line with your professional goals. By setting regular meetings with your mentors and having an agenda for those meetings, you will be able to maximize learning opportunities for yourself.

Understand University Expectations

You should have a broad sense of university expectations related to research, teaching, and service from the interview process before you accept your faculty appointment. As described above, before accepting a position, it is important to determine if the university's expectations are consistent with your professional strengths and goals. Many universities have a new faculty orientation that will frequently provide valuable information regarding pre-tenure expectations. It is important to fully understand expectations regarding research productivity (including the procurement of external funding), teaching load, and service at the departmental, college, university, community, and professional levels, and to make sure that your range of responsibilities and the time allotted to each is reflective of and in balance with these expectations. For example, if your university places the greatest emphasis in their tenure decisions on research productivity with a secondary emphasis on teaching, you should allocate your time in each of these activities accordingly (i.e., spending most of your time engaged in research and publication). Your university mentors can provide guidance in this process and help you to set boundaries.

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Begin to Assemble Your Tenure Dossier During Your First Semester

Assembling the tenure dossier can be a daunting task. This task can be made less overwhelming if you are well organized and develop a working dossier that you continue to refine throughout the pre-tenure years. Start off with a large binder divided into three sections for teaching, research, and service, and a package of clear plastic sheet protectors. As you develop teaching products such as syllabi, presentation slides, rubrics for grading student work, materials for class activities, and student evaluations, slide these materials into the sheet protectors in the teaching section of the binder. As you publish papers or write grant applications, slide these into the research section. Save permanent products that document your service activities in the service section of the binder. Over the pre-tenure years, these materials will begin to pile up, and it is good to have them all in one location. This type of organizational system will also enable you to consolidate information for your annual merit reviews and the dossier that you assemble for the third or fourth year review. It is also a good idea to scan these documents at the end of each semester so you have electronic copies of them.

Update Your Vita on a Regular Basis

Your vita is the single most important document for demonstrating your skills and accomplishments. Update it regularly, particularly early in your career (i.e., pre-tenure). In the day-to-day business of academic life, it is easy to forget seemingly little things you did during the day. Did you serve as a guest lecturer at another university? Did you do a community service presentation? Did you form a discussion group for graduate students interested in pursuing academic careers in psychology? Make sure these and other items, which may be easily and quickly forgotten, are on your vita as soon as you do them. Also, when documenting your publication accomplishments, do not simply report your refereed journal articles and book chapters. In addition to these, have separate sections for Manuscripts in Submission, Manuscripts in Preparation, and Research in Progress. That way, readers of your vita (e.g., reappointment and tenure committees) can clearly see the trajectory of your research development.

Choose Projects Carefully, but Follow Your Bliss

Carefully consider any possible research projects before committing to them. Reappointment and tenure committees not only examine a faculty member's quantity and quality of research, but also its thematic consistency. Develop expertise in a particular area and a research line that can potentially lead to a series of publications in that area. That said, if a particular topic excites you but you perceive

it as being outside of your research area, consider doing it anyway. Academic freedom is an earned luxury of the academic life, so take advantage of it. In the words of the late mythologist Joseph Campbell, "follow your bliss." Also, consider that an interest you wish to pursue but perceive as being outside your area may not be if you simply reframe it. For example, the psychologist who studies both sport psychology and addictions may see these as different interests, when, in fact, they could be viewed as two components of an overall interest in health psychology.

Approach Research in a "Pipeline" Fashion

While still in graduate school, one of the authors received some extremely helpful advice from one of his mentors, a widely published and highly respected scholar. This very productive academic described his "2-2-2 rule," which essentially states that one's goal as an academic (in a research institution) should be to simultaneously have two journal articles in submission, two articles in preparation, and two studies for which data is being collected at any one time. Maintaining this level of performance on a consistent basis will ensure a continual "pipeline" of research productivity and greatly enhance one's probability of receiving tenure.

Schedule an Annual Meeting with Your Dean or Department Chair to Review Your Progress

Typically, new faculty are reviewed for promotion and tenure after completion of their fifth year. Prior to their tenure review, faculty members also are typically twice reviewed for reappointment. Although formal evaluation occurs at these times, there is no reason to wait until reappointment or tenure reviews to receive feedback on one's performance. Instead, get in the habit of meeting at the end of each academic year with your dean or department chair to discuss your progress and review your vita. Deans and department chairs will be familiar with the norms and expectations for tenure at your college or university, and their feedback can be highly instructive.

Set Ambitious Yet Realistic Goals

As you begin your first faculty appointment, you may find that you have no idea where to begin. You need to navigate a new college or university system, develop new relationships with colleagues and students, prepare new courses, and set up your research agenda. In addition, you may be asked to jump right into service at the department and/or university levels. It is important to recognize that it is normal to feel overwhelmed during this time and that your mentors can be of assistance. One of the best pieces of advice one of us received from an advisor was not to collect data during the first year. Although getting one's research off the ground as quickly as possible is always beneficial,

doing this the first year on the job may be unrealistic and frequently impractical. Instead, consider focusing on projects such as writing up papers from pre-existing data (e.g., your dissertation), writing an internally funded grant, and/or setting up the research infrastructure necessary for conducting future studies. Ambitious-yet-realistic goal setting is a critical skill for achieving success.

When setting ambitious-yet-realistic goals, it is important to think both in the long term and the short term. After deciding on the long-term goals, break them into smaller semester-by-semester sub-goals to make sure they are realistic. These can be reviewed with mentors to determine if you are “on the right track” to achieving your tenure and promotion goals. Set goals that take you well beyond tenure, and you will often find that tenure will take care of itself. One of the most important long-term goals is to try to balance both personal and professional commitments. The following section will offer some advice in this area.

Tips for Balancing Work and Home Life

The ability to balance work and personal life is correlated with lower levels of stress and burnout, and higher levels of job satisfaction, engagement, and the intention to stay on the job (Mickey-Boggs, 2004). Statements like this provide validation for the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors experienced when balance is missing. That is, even a brief period of unbalance can create seemingly unbearable, intense pressures.

Burnout and balancing difficulties have been reported as more prevalent among women (Mickey-Boggs, 2004), and this finding appears to have some relevance within academic psychology as well. For example, although survey findings about academic jobs in school psychology have suggested that many women faculty members perceive academic climates to be generally positive, gender disparities also were perceived (Akin-Little, Bray, Eckert, & Kehle, 2004). In that study, women reported experiencing stress in balancing work and personal obligations. More specifically, women cited inadequate parental leave and inadequate and unaffordable child care as being major concerns. As such, it appears prudent – particularly for women – to attend early in your career to fostering strategies for creating and maintaining balance between work and home life. Although the tips we present below are not necessarily new, each does serve as a useful reminder about the above. As noted by Hopson (n. d.), you cannot expect life balance to come solely from your job. Life balance includes additional factors, such as a sense of emotional support from friends, hobbies, and relationships.

Maintain a Positive, Flexible Attitude

Throughout your life, it is highly unlikely that you will be rewarded simultaneously on all fronts. That is, it is a rare day when your child tells you that you are the best parent in

the whole wide world, your students compliment your lecture as the best ever heard, and you get an acceptance letter to a top-tier journal after a first round of reviews of your manuscript. “Balance” at all times is probably an illusion – in reality, you are more likely to find concurrent success to be a rarity. Acknowledging this will help you maintain a positive, flexible attitude as you are faced with different challenges. For example, when you get that rejection letter, maintaining a positive and flexible attitude can make it easier to mentally note, “revisions will clearly need to be done, but right now I am heading home to work out and walk my dog.” Accepting that “things happen” can thwart negative thoughts and feelings that can easily throw off your balance and allow you to handle situations that arise with a more positive, flexible perspective.

Plan Ahead

As noted in the previous sections, advance planning can be very helpful in facilitating a successful academic career. Planning ahead not only creates a vision for your career path, but also can help maintain balance between work and home life. For example, if you have decided your research goals for the next three years, it becomes easier to say no to projects that come up in the interim. That is, if a project is not closely related to your goals and does not provide “gain” in another realm, then you should probably not agree to take on the project. Planning ahead can also be of assistance in the short term as well. For example, we routinely list our common projects, note the current stage of each, and set timelines for completion. We are then able to prioritize and focus on those we need to complete within the month, semester, year, etc. Routine re-evaluation of our “plan” facilitates better communication and efficiency with regard to our work – which, of course, makes us happier (i.e., more balanced) when we get home each night.

Stay Organized

Related to planning ahead, getting and staying organized is another strategy for facilitating work and home balance. Currently, one of the biggest organizational challenges can stem from technology. Thus, investing time upfront to create efficient systems for organization and storage of all technology needs (e.g., computer files, email, calendars) can prevent disorganization down the road. Specific advice will be at least partially dependent on the technology available in your workplace (e.g., server storage); thus, building connections with your instructional technology (IT) staff can be important. Also, thinking about how you will store your “paper” also becomes relevant to staying organized. One strategy that some of us have used for staying organized with regard to teaching is to set aside about a week per class prior to the beginning of each semester to sort through materials, prepare the lecture, group everything needed for each class together, and then file away or toss

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the things that won't be used. This advance organizational strategy helps prevent running around 20 minutes before class trying to figure out what to do and where the needed materials might be.

Stay Connected

Academic jobs can be lonely. Hopefully you will find a position in which there is a wonderful, collegial atmosphere. Even in that climate, however, you can expect that most of the work will be done by yourself. You will be developing an independent line of teaching and research, of which the responsibility for accomplishing the associated tasks (think LOTS of writing) will fall on you. It is easy to become caught up in completing the never-ending tasks, so it becomes important to take the time to connect with colleagues, both within and outside your university, to create a network of people who can understand the situations you are faced with and provide a needed "reality" check. One good place to find those people is within your graduate school cohort. Although you may not necessarily have similar research interests or live in a similar geographic region, fostering and maintaining a network of supports that begins in graduate school is a good way to stay connected, and thus, keep balance. In fact, as our "network" has grown over the past few years, we eagerly await the time we can get together to socialize at annual conferences!

Conclusion

Academia can provide a stressful but highly rewarding career. We hope the tips and recommendations provided above will be helpful to those graduate students exploring and/or considering an academic career in psychology. Graduate students interested in additional information are encouraged to review other sources, particularly Bain (2004); Boice (2000); Clark, et al. (2006); Darley, Zanna, and Roediger (2004); Fernald (1995); Iacono (1981); Lang (2005); Nickerson and Gagnon (2003); Rheingold (1994); and Sternberg (2004). These texts and articles discuss a wide variety of issues in academia and are highly recommended.

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