Survival manual for new faculty

Seasoned faculty members around the country offer tips for new professors.

By ASHLEIGH VANHOUTEN | September 9, 2015

Your first term as a full-time professor can be overwhelming, to say the least. The demands for your time and attention from different quarters may seem never-ending. No doubt there will be some areas of responsibility where you feel inadequate.

So, we turned to faculty and staff who are known for their expertise in teaching, research and service for advice. Their responses were thoughtful, diverse and rich with experience. We’ve collected them into categories of teaching, research and service as well as relationships and work-life balance. We hope this advice will help get you off to a smooth start.

Teaching

Seek feedback. One useful technique to refine your teaching approach is known as “Stop, start, continue.” Ask students to write one or two ideas under each heading – things they would prefer you to stop doing, start doing and continue doing in support of their learning. Collect their input and report back during the next class on the common themes. This will provide an early indicator of your effectiveness and an opportunity to adjust your approach before the end of the semester’s course evaluations (which will inevitably be higher as a result). Students appreciate faculty who seek their input and demonstrate, in concrete ways, their willingness to adapt. – Julia Christensen Hughes, dean of the college of business and economics at the University of Guelph

Develop and nurture your lab groups. Know that what your graduate students do and say reflects on you. Help them understand that you are committed to their success, both in their graduate program and
Beyond. As a junior faculty member, one of your important roles is to be an idea generator: you must inspire and motivate your graduate students. Put their success first. You will always win with that formula. –Jeffrey McDonnell, professor in the school of environment and sustainability, University of Saskatchewan

Be willing to take risks. Full-time academic faculty members are given an unusual degree of security. We have a great deal of latitude in our teaching, relatively little supervision by the administration and a lot of good will from our students. In this context we can afford to take risks, try new teaching techniques, address challenging materials and reveal our real passions. We can take risks to reform the university environments in which we work, both in our classrooms and in the institution as a whole. Over the long term, risk-taking innovations lead to healthy, creative universities. –David Creelman, professor of English in the department of humanities and languages, University of New Brunswick

Be a mentor for the next generation. Our potential for direct or indirect impact on our students is hard to measure, but it is easy to underestimate. At the risk of sounding nostalgic, in an era of continuous electronic connectivity it is the human connection we make with students through our teaching and mentoring that has the potential to be life-changing. A kind word of encouragement or well-informed advice dispensed at the right time can have a profound impact on the decisions and life trajectory of many students, as they try to gain a foothold in an increasingly competitive and complex world. –Zopito A. Marini, professor of child and youth studies in the faculty of social sciences and a 3M National Teaching Fellow, Brock University

Research

Carve out uninterrupted research time. Set at least one day aside per week to work, uninterrupted, on your research. Avoid email and immerse yourself in your writing. Welcome the peer review process; it will inevitably strengthen your work. Present your ideas at departmental research seminars; ask your peers for feedback. When you do get a publication accepted, work with communications experts at your university to prepare a press release or write an article for the opinion pages of a newspaper. (We all need to do a better job of demonstrating the relevance of our scholarly pursuits to the public.) And, share your research with your students. Finding ways to effectively combine all of your scholarly interests — research, teaching and disseminating knowledge — will help get maximum benefit from your efforts. –Dr. Christensen Hughes, U of Guelph

Develop a clear research focus, mission and identity. This research brand identity should be the umbrella for all your work. Have a few key questions that can define you and your work, ones that will sustain you for years or even decades (mine have been the same for 25 years). Then seek to lead the field on these questions with journal commentary, journal papers, editing books and special issues, invitations to give talks and conference sessions. At tenure time, you’ll be “known” for something, and this focus will help you through your entire career. –Dr. McDonnell, U of S

Learn about the culture and politics of your department and university. Every department is different, and you will be interacting with many members and staff of the department over time. Learn how department decisions are made. Find out which people are good resources for you. Gauge the interests and strengths of various people in the department. Beyond the department, discover, explore and exploit the university’s services, particularly in the area of grant-writing support and teaching. –Marty Wall, teaching consultant, University of Victoria

Service

Volunteer. Strategically volunteer for a service assignment that fits well with your teaching or research
and that will give you some profile. This will help you connect with others and learn more about the functioning of your discipline, department, the university or your community. You will also establish yourself as someone who wants to help make a difference. But be sure to choose something that is not too onerous because the bulk of your time must go towards establishing your teaching and research. Try to choose something that is high-profile and valued, and say no to other service engagements. – Dr. Christensen Hughes, U of Guelph

Be an engaged, organizational citizen. By becoming actively involved, I learned a lot. For example, I learned more about the assessment process from serving on the assessment committee early in my career than I ever could have from reading the collective agreement. My service on various committees also helped me integrate quickly into the department, faculty and institution. Of course, you have to be prudent about how much service you commit to, but social integration into the life of the institution is key to winning allies and advocates, and it helps you understand the institutional culture. This is especially important for members of various minority groups who might be overlooked if they remain unknown. – Joy Mighty, associate vice-president (teaching and learning), Carlton University

Deliver. You must seek to excel. And it is the effort that counts even more than the results. If you say you will do something, get it done. You will become known as someone who delivers. Delivering applies to every aspect of your role as a faculty member. It means giving 100 percent in your teaching, your research and your service responsibilities. Let’s see – that’s 300 percent. Wow! Welcome to academia. – Dr. Mighty, Carlton

Be a mentor. Meet new professors in other departments and faculties so that you can learn from each other and break the isolation. In your first year, find a mentor-buddy inside your department who can show you the ropes. Later, you can seek a mentor outside your department and faculty. – Françoise Moreau-Johnson, manager of the Centre for Academic Leadership, University of Ottawa

Relationships

Surround yourself with good people. Three or four senior colleagues provided tremendous support to me when I was starting out. Only one of them was even close to my field of specialization, but they allowed me to vent, showed me the ropes and offered blunt and targeted advice. A couple of them found ways to co-author with me, one helped me design my first grad course, another sat in on my first undergrad classes and critiqued and critiqued (and drew caricatures of me while I lectured). Other “good people” are those from outside the university who conduct research with me; they open doors for me and my students. Good people might be fellow academic collaborators who complement your style, are reliable, energize you, challenge you and encourage you to do your best. – Maureen G. Reed, professor and assistant director with the school of environment and sustainability, University of Saskatchewan

Be good to others. Academia is a small world. As time goes on, you will come across people in your field all over the world who know you, know of you, know someone who knows you. What goes around will come around. So being a good citizen and finding ways to pay forward or pay back will also reap rewards down the road. If you surround yourself with good people, be sure to be a good person in that virtuous circle. – Dr. Reed, U of S

Be mindful of becoming isolated. Even though academic pursuits remain largely individualistic, it is worthwhile, even necessary, to make the effort to become an active contributing member to various communities. Academics can simultaneously belong to many communities, each with its unique culture, norms and values, ranging from one’s department and university to national and international professional organizations. Remaining connected to these communities can have both personal and professional benefits. – Dr. Marini, Brock
Accept that your colleagues and students won’t always like you. When I started as an assistant professor, a longtime mentor said to me: “Learn how to say no.” Great advice. But by saying no — to students demanding higher marks, to administrators wanting you to apply for more and bigger grants, to colleagues looking for administrative help — people will inevitably be disappointed and sometimes angry with you. Learning how to say no also requires learning how to accept that people won’t always like you. —David R. Smith, assistant professor in the biology department, Western University

Don’t continually compare yourself to others. In today’s world of academic metrics and faculty websites, it is easy to compare yourself to your colleagues, peers and former supervisors. But continually doing so can lead to a sense of inadequacy or an inflated ego, neither of which is a productive or healthy mindset. Know where the bar is set — for your department, institute and field of study — but then focus on your own goals and don’t get distracted by rankings. —Dr. Smith, Western

Work-life balance

Take a moment each day to appreciate the university campus where you work. These campuses hold some of the most majestic and historic buildings, and care has been put into their layout. We build grand, edifying things for grand, edifying ideas. Higher education is one of these ideas that matter, and the campuses by and large reflect this belief. —Theodore Christou, assistant professor of social studies, graduate faculty, Queen’s University

Say no. Practice in the mirror if you must, but say no. You need not supervise every student who asks you to do so. You need not serve on every committee that has an open space. You need not take on every collaboration in writing. Say no once a day, at least, and follow this up with “thank you.” —Dr. Christou, Queen’s University

Develop coping skills early. This will get you through the first few years where work-life balance is difficult. It will get easier with time as you become faster and more efficient at tasks that now consume enormous amounts of time (paper reviews and committee work, for example). In fact, it gets easier with each passing year. Book what’s important to you first. Then book around those things. Rank the items on your daily to-do list to best serve your most important needs (e.g. writing and submitting research papers). Learn how to say no with great diplomacy. Delegate where possible, set realistic deadlines and give yourself permission to take (some) evenings or weekend days off. —Dr. McDonnell, U of S

Organize and manage your time. The first few months are crucial and it is easy to spend too much time on some things and too little on other things. Establish an orderly routine that takes into account deadlines and responsibilities, and establish some discipline in meeting your short- and long-term commitments in good time. —Dr. Wall, UVic

Foster relationships and interests outside academia. Academic jobs can be all-encompassing: my work, which is my passion, spills into every aspect of my life and at times can make my life feel unbalanced. Consequently, I’ve tried hard to foster friendships, hobbies and interests outside academia. It’s amazing how refreshing it is to spend an evening or weekend with someone who could care less about genome evolution and university politics. —Dr. Smith, Western

Make time for yourself. This sounds obvious, but we can become so busy “doing” —researching, teaching, serving and home-making — that we don’t take enough time to reflect on what we are doing, how and why. A president once advised me to schedule time for myself every week. I took that advice seriously and ever since have dedicated one day a week (typically Friday) as my work-at-home day. It allowed me to reflect on what I was doing and why. I could catch up on things I’d been planning to do all week, or plan ahead, slow down and breathe. I created a sign for my door that said My Maintenance Day.
and if I had to go into the office for some reason, everyone understood that I was not really there. People humoured me and respected it. —Dr. Mighty, Carlton