OH, THE PLACES YOU’LL GO!

TAKING CHARGE OF YOUR CAREER IN ACADEMIA NOW & LATER

As you have already begun to find out - life in academia is a complex balancing act. Graduate students are often managing multiple roles - student, researcher, and research/teaching assistant. The most successful grad students use strategies to stay sane, productive, and organized, and this becomes even more necessary if you decide to enter a career in academe. How do you begin to develop these strategies? Read on!

Identifying Responsibilities

Your professional responsibilities as a grad student are related to those you will have as a new faculty member, although there are differences. These figures (right) depict how you may focus your time on your professional responsibilities, and how this changes as you progress through your career. Let’s review these:

Coursework: As a new grad student, this will be your main priority for awhile, but don’t approach your classes like an undergrad! Use your coursework to begin or revise publishable materials, conference proposals, or even small, departmental presentations. And consider every professor you work with as a potential future collaborator - make the most of your time with them. Of course, there will come a point when your coursework will end, and more self-directed work will take it’s place. So much the better for you if you’ve been using your classes to generate research ideas and products all along.

Research & Writing: To finish your degree on time, focus your energies here as coursework dissipates. Try setting a schedule of one hour, three times a week to work on this. Even if you simply browse and save literature during several hours, a steady schedule will help keep you on track, and form good habits for later. If you go on to teach at a research institution, these habits will serve you well in a “Publish or Perish” environment!

Service: Most graduate students have no idea what “Service” is. While service is not required of you as a student, it will be part of your tenure requirement if you pursue a teaching position, so it is to your benefit to explore this now. “Service” can be performed for your department, your institution, or your discipline, and may constitute tasks such as sitting on committees, organizing events, or coordinating internal reports or publications.

Teaching/Professional Internships: These valuable experiences often take up more of your time than you would think, so plan a little extra “give” in your schedule in these semesters until you adjust to the new responsibilities. If you plan to pursue a faculty position, developing teaching skills through work as a TA or as an instructor will give you an advantage when you are expected to teach 2, 3, or even 5 courses per semester as a faculty member.

Professional Responsibilities As:

A New Graduate Student:

Coursework
Research
Net-working

An Advanced Grad Student:

Research & Writing
Service
Teaching/Internship
Net-working

A New Faculty Member:

Research & Writing (%)
Service (%)
Teaching (%)
Net-working

How Research, Service, and Teaching will each count towards tenure at your new institution may vary - this is something you’ll want to find out right away!
**Professional Networking:** You may be surprised to see “Networking” listed here as one of your responsibilities, but both service and research often require collaboration, and actively seeking and maintaining professional relationships as a graduate student will aid you in making the transition to a faculty position, where success is often correlated with positive and productive partnerships.

Understanding where to put your energies can help you avoid over-committing or delaying the achievement of your goals. Of course, you have personal obligations and relationships, and it is absolutely necessary to make time for yourself as well. Inadequate planning on these fronts can leave you feeling exhausted and in doubt - what am I doing all this hard work for?? *Is it really worth it?* If you find that you’ve become over-committed or discouraged, reviewing your long-term goals can help re-focus your priorities, productively direct your energies, and renew your sense of purpose.

**Setting Goals**

This is one of the most important things you can do to take charge of your career now, and as a faculty member. Sure, you know you have a goal to graduate, but do you have a timeline? Have you investigated the requirements and mapped out benchmarks for yourself? This weekend, give yourself an hour to sit down and write out the answers to these 5 questions:

1. Where do I want to be professionally in 5 years? What is required to get there?
2. What sacrifices am I willing to make? What sacrifices am I not willing to make to get to my goal?
3. How does my family and personal life fit in with these goals? Can I relocate? What responsibilities do I envision cropping up in the next five years?
4. What financial goals do I have? Are they compatible with my professional goals, or do I need to adjust one or the other? What will my student-loan payments be?
5. So...Taking all of this into account, where do I expect to be professionally in 5 years?

Then speak to your advisor, peers, senior grad students in your program, and others in your field to determine what is really required to graduate and meet your goals, and plan your course.

**Creating a Timeline**

When you feel comfortable with your decisions, set sub-goals and create a timeline. Where do you need to be in one year or two to be on your way? What products should you have? What smaller steps do you have to take to meet these benchmarks?

Be realistic about the impact that family obligations and finances will have on your progress, and be honest about the sacrifices you are and are not willing to make - violating your personal decisions in these areas will only make you unhappy and unproductive.

**Staying on Target**

One useful tool for managing progress towards your goals is the matrix pictured here*. This matrix can be used to help you prioritize activities in your life according to two axes - how important they are, and how urgent they are. While urgent tasks have the most immediacy in our lives, one of the biggest roadblocks to achieving our goals is ignoring tasks that are important but not urgent. Understanding what goals you want to achieve and setting yourself deadlines and benchmarks to get to there means you have taken the time to consider these important aspects and have a plan for moving them into your immediate field of vision.

*Matrix Adapted from Stephen Covey (1994).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urgent &amp; Important</td>
<td>Quadrant of Necessity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I (Manage) Crisis</td>
<td>II (Focus) Preparation/planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Emergencies</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deadline-driven projects</td>
<td>Values clarification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last minute preparations for scheduled activities</td>
<td>Exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>Quadrant of Waste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III (Avoid) Interruptions</td>
<td>IV (Avoid) Busywork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some calls, mail, &amp; reports</td>
<td>Junk mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some meetings</td>
<td>Some phone messages/email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many imposed “pressing” matters</td>
<td>Time wasters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many popular activities</td>
<td>Escape activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>Quadrant of Deception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV (Avoid) Mindless TV shows</td>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Revise & Repeat**

When you start looking for your first job, it is time to set these goals again, and when you land that first faculty position, you should review and revise in order to set yourself on a path for success. Being clear on where you want to go is one of the best aids to helping you get there. Just as you spoke to your advisor, peers, and seniors to determine the best ways to navigate your graduate program, as a new faculty member you will access your chairperson and other faculty members in your department to figure out the tenure process. Is research emphasized more than teaching, or is it the other way around? What constitutes an acceptable level of ‘service’? Figure out, quickly, what elements you need to emphasize to achieve tenure at your new institution, and then map out your plan. Consider the implications on your family, personal life, and finances, and set sub-goals and benchmarks.

**The Challenge**

In short, whatever stage you’re in along this academic path, identifying roles, setting goals, reviewing priorities, creating timelines, and meeting self-set benchmarks along the way will put you ahead of the game. Why not make a plan to start right now? President’s Day Weekend (2/12-2/15) offers us all a mini-break to step back from the “Urgent” and consider the “Important”. Set aside some time to answer the 5 questions, write out your plan, lay down a timeline, and take control of your career for now, and five years from now. Good luck!

*Did you take the President’s Day Challenge? We want to hear about it! Send us an email and let us know if you found this article helpful, what self-discoveries you made, or what you still need to know! ITLALstudent02@uamail.albany.edu*