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Open Letter to 2010-11's First-Time Tenure-Track Professors

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Today at ProfHacker we begin a new series on the transitions we experience and move through in higher education. One of the biggest (shocking, startling, unsettling, stress producing) transitions is from graduate student to full-time tenure-track assistant professor. And that's our post today: "An Open Letter to Next Year's Full-Time Tenure Track Assistant Professors."

Working in higher education can be difficult, and as graduate students, we think we understand those difficulties. We think we've been trained to handle whatever comes our way. Then we get the tenure track position, and, well, the transition from grad student to faculty member isn't always pretty. Today the voices of experience--those of us current assistant professors, those who are ending their first year right now--have perspectives incoming faculty members might need hear. What we want to provide today are words that we wish we'd received before we started our first year as assistant professors.

A few weeks ago, in preparation for this post, I asked my on-line blogging and twitter friends--folks who went on the job market and into first jobs at the same time I did--what one piece of advice they wish they'd received before they started their first tenure track position. Here are their anonymous replies to the question: **If you could offer one piece of advice to an incoming faculty member, what would it be?**

- Go to lunch with other faculty members, especially if there's a campus space/faculty/staff lunch room/club -- It's how you can get to know people from other departments who may well be your lifeline, information source, shoulder to cry on, inspiration, team-teaching/research partner.... Also you can make friends.

- Don't be afraid to say no to service, even when you think you should take on the task. Pick your service load limit (using male colleagues as your standard, since they do less service and get more credit), and stick to that limit.
- Make everything into research.
- Get in the habit of writing regularly.
- Don't be surprised if your writing production falls significantly the first semester. You are transitioning on many levels, and you might not have the mental energy to create.
- Schedule writing time and protect it like you would the time you teach, or a doctor's appointment, or something else you value highly.
- Check out *Advice for New Faculty Members* by Robert Boice and *From Dissertation to Book* by William Germano.
- Remember to feed your soul with something you really love or enjoy. Without recharging, it's hard to keep writing, teaching, serving on committees, and doing all the other things we're supposed to do as faculty members.
- Make sure you engage in a hobby or two, something that's very different from your daily working activities.
- Try to limit your administrative work until post-tenure.
- Don't believe all the horror stories you hear about personalities within departments. Not everyone (anyone!?!) will want to fire you. In fact, they hired you: they want you to succeed.
- Get a mentor who can help you navigate the local culture; if your department doesn't already do this, ask for one.
- Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do.
- Find your own mentor (or mentors) even if the department assigns you one.
- Don't put everything you do in the context of tenure; do the job well, and you make your tenure case.
- Get to know your new colleagues on your own terms, as much as possible. That is, try not to let people's reputations--good or bad--predetermine your relationship with them.
- Don't read all the horror stories (forums, chatrooms, etc.). In fact, steer clear of the negativity that can pervade academia.
- No matter how mind-blowing the thing you just heard (or were asked to do), wait three days before deciding its magnitude.
- Get everything in writing. Keep a copy of your job ad for future reference. If changes are made to your job description, get it in writing.
- Breathe. Also, smile and nod, especially when you are worn out.
- Be a good, generous listener. Equally important: be perceived as a good, generous listener.
- You don't have to do it all at once.

- For the first year, put your personal wellness first: choose fitness, healthy socializing, whole foods, and sleep.
- Exercise, exercise, exercise.

And finally,

- Study documents such as departmental by-laws, union contracts, and the faculty handbook as though your tenure depended on it--because it might! On a reasonably well-functioning campus, written policy will trump gossip/speculation about what 'really' goes on. You can also learn a fair amount about the history of your institution through these documents--policies often bear witness to the departmental/institutional battles of yesteryear. (I've always found that comforting: Policy X is this way, not because people are idiots, but because it was the only way to solve impasse Y. As long as there's a reason..) Finally, remember that your department probably wants you to succeed. The path to promotion and tenure isn't like crossing a DMZ.

How about you? What do you wish someone had told you your first year as a tenure-track professor? What one piece of advice would you offer next year's incoming group? Please leave suggestions in comments below.

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The Caveat: *my department, college, and university did a fabulous job with the tenure-track new hires last fall (of which I was one). My colleagues were prepared, sensitive, and knowledgeable, and they knew to anticipate many of the obstacles I found myself stumbling over. However, this post isn't about them. It's about next year's first-year tenure track assistant professors and what we can do to help them have a good year.*