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The Five Characteristics of Successful New Faculty Members

By Rob Jenkins

No doubt all you brand-new faculty members at two-year colleges who read my August [column](#)—and probably most who didn't—have gotten off to a strong start in the classroom. After all, teaching is your strong suit. Now you're probably wondering, what about the rest of the job? How do I make the most of those 25 working hours a week (theoretically) that are not spent in front of a whiteboard?

The truth is, when it comes to getting your career off on the right foot, what you do outside the classroom is just as important as what you do inside it, if not more. Certainly you will be formally judged on your teaching, but you will also be judged, both formally and informally, on your performance as a department member and campus citizen. And those judgments will be more public and likelier to stick with you.

Based on my own experiences as a "newbie" (four times), as well as my observations as a department chairman and an academic dean, I've identified five characteristics of faculty members whose first few months set a positive tone for their entire careers:

Be humble. You might be surprised at how many new hires show up believing they're smarter than their colleagues, or thinking they already know more about how the institution ought to function than do people who have been there 20 years.

You should assume that, as a rookie, you know nothing about the culture of the institution or the way it runs, much less the way it ought to run. Spend the first few months watching and listening to the people around you, observing how they conduct themselves and how others respond to them. From that you will learn much about how to behave—and how not to.

Seek out an experienced faculty mentor, someone who's been at the college at least three or four years. Avoid members of the "old guard" who appear jaded, disillusioned, and burned out; you don't want their attitudes to rub off on you. Look for someone who knows the ropes but hasn't yet considered using them to hang himself/herself.

(Note: Your department chair may assign you a mentor, but if that relationship is unsatisfactory, feel free to seek out another one on your own. You may very well start with a mentor and end up with a friend.)

Be willing. I mean willing to do just about anything, within limits.

The list of tasks you will be asked to perform as a new hire is virtually endless, as your department head "volunteers" you for various unpleasant assignments (because asking you is less risky than asking someone with more seniority) and harried colleagues seek to shift some of their workload onto you. You will be expected to serve on departmental committees, represent the department on collegewide bodies, sponsor student organizations, judge contests; the list goes on.

Add to those chores the ones that everyone has, like grading exams and advising students, and the load can quickly become daunting.

That's why I say "within limits." It's important to be able to say no, especially when all of those other tasks begin to interfere with your primary responsibility of teaching, or leave you with no personal life. But it's equally important to say yes whenever possible, because, quite frankly, that's how you'll endear yourself to colleagues and administrators.

Occasionally I encounter new faculty members who refuse to do anything "extra," anything for which they aren't (in their minds) getting paid. They're determined not to be "exploited" by "the system."

The truth is, in a community-college setting, I don't even know what constitutes "extra." There's a lot to be done and sometimes no clear delineation between one's official duties and everything else. That's why we expect people to be willing to pitch in and do whatever it takes to serve, well, the system—meaning students, the department, and the institution. If you think that's exploitation, then I suggest you talk with doctors and lawyers about their first-year experiences on the job.

Be organized. That's the only way anyone can cope with the myriad tasks described above, plus teach five courses, while still maintaining some semblance of sanity.

Organization means, first of all, time management. I highly recommend using some sort of daily planner, whether print or electronic. Enter your classes and office hours first, then add other recurring commitments, such as regularly scheduled department or club meetings. Keep track of any new entries as well, including appointments with students, committee meetings, and campus events.

Then you can see the gaps in your schedule and plan to use that time for things like grading papers, working on committee assignments, and eating.

Being organized also means keeping track of your paperwork. There's no profession quite like teaching when it comes to generating paper, much of which is vital to the job: class rolls, drop/add slips, course syllabi, tests, handouts. And nothing can be more frustrating, time-consuming, and potentially embarrassing than spending 10 or 15 minutes looking for that one piece of paper you need. So take time to set up a filing system that works well for you. Then follow it. Don't just throw your papers haphazardly across your desk the minute you walk into the office (unless, of course, that happens to be your system).

Be collegial. Be friendly, open to sharing ideas and materials, and willing to help out a colleague in need. Your collegiality must extend not just to other faculty members but also to everyone else on the campus, including librarians, admissions counselors, and custodians.

It's especially important for new faculty members to cultivate a good working relationship—even a friendship, if possible—with the one person who has the most influence over their immediate happiness. No, I'm not talking about the department chair. I mean the department secretary. In fact, that's probably the single best piece of advice I'll give in this column, because having to deal every day with a department secretary who doesn't like you is the definition of misery for a new faculty member.

And why wouldn't the department secretary like you? Perhaps because you disregarded my next and final admonition.

Be low-maintenance. No one enjoys being around people who are always needy, who always expect others to go out of their way but rarely reciprocate, whose lives are always fraught with some sort of drama. Yet a surprising number of new faculty members fit that profile. (Some not-so-new ones, too.)

Remember, while your colleagues might not mind helping you out occasionally, they probably won't like doing it regularly. Department chairs expect to provide a certain amount of mentoring, but they have better things to do than hold your hand for the next 10 months (or 10 years). And, trust me on this, department secretaries divide faculty members into two categories: those who are high-maintenance and those they like.

So make your own copies rather than just leave your handout on the secretary's desk. Don't go to your department chair with a problem you can solve yourself or with a little help from a friend or mentor. Do more favors than you ask for.

The reputation you forge during your first year, fair or not, will stay with you at least as long as you're at the college. Maybe longer. It's worth a little extra time and effort (maybe a lot extra) to make sure that reputation is a good one.

Rob Jenkins is an associate professor of English and director of the Writers Institute at Georgia Perimeter College. He writes occasionally for our community-college column. If you would like to write for our regular column on faculty and administrative careers at two-year colleges, or have a topic to propose, we would like to hear from you. Send your ideas to careers@chronicle.com.