

The Three-ring Circus of Academia: How to Become the Ringmaster

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Abstract The three-ring circus of academia is made up of research, teaching, and service. It is also characterized by continuous action that must be facilitated by the academic ringmaster. Academic life is more difficult than most anticipate because the responsibilities are time-consuming, diverse, and conflicting. Therefore, this article focuses on strategies faculty members can develop to meet these pressing demands. Specifically, we begin with a discussion of how to balance research, teaching, and service. We then highlight strategies faculty members can use in becoming an effective academic ringmaster. We conclude with a discussion of life outside the “big top.”

Key words college teaching · faculty development · junior faculty · research productivity · tenure

What is the three-ring circus of academia? The three-ring circus of academia is made up of research, teaching, and service. Research is similar to the high-wire acts and acrobats. It is a necessary “act.” It is what draws many people to the circus and amazes them. Similarly, research is what brings prestige to the university (Wolverton 1998).

Teaching, on the other hand, can be analogous to the work of the animal tamers. The skills that are required to train these animals to do tricks are appreciated. However, the

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animal acts are often overshadowed by the acrobats unless the animals are out of control. Relating this more directly to teaching, although teaching is extremely valuable, it is not a sufficient condition for receiving tenure; and it often goes unnoticed unless one is a poor teacher (Milem et al. 2000; Wolverson 1998).

Continuing our circus analogy, service obligations are similar to the clowns. They are a distraction between the main acts (teaching and research), but would be sorely missed if they were not part of the show. In other words, service is expected and important to the functioning of the institution (Ballantine 1995); however, it is not highly regarded when making tenure decisions, and it certainly will not compensate for poor teaching or limited research productivity (Mullen and Forbes 2000).

Furthermore, the three-ring circus is characterized by continuous action that must be facilitated by the ringmaster. Similar to the ringmaster, faculty members are required to simultaneously focus their time on multiple “acts.” Being the academic ringmaster is more difficult than most anticipate because the responsibilities are time-consuming, diverse, and often conflicting (Gunter and Stambach 2003). Simultaneously focusing on these multiple “acts” has become even more difficult in recent decades because of the changing nature of academia (Ballantine 1995; Fox 1992; Mallard and Atkins 2004; Milem et al. 2000). Specifically, universities and colleges are receiving less state and federal funding leading to an increased reliance on external funding to support their institutions (Austin 2002). As a result, there is increased pressure on faculty members to secure external funds.

Although some would expect that the time involved in meeting these increasing research demands detracts from the time spent on teaching, Milem et al. (2000) found that faculty members today are spending more time on both research-related and teaching-related activities. In addition, Mallard and Atkins (2004) found that service demands have remained the same. Moreover, faculty members are required not only to engage in these activities; they are expected to perform well in all three areas (Ballantine 1995). Consequently, they need to develop strategies to meet the pressing demands required to be effective ringmasters.

Therefore, this article focuses on becoming the ringmaster of the three-ring circus of academia. Specifically, we begin with a discussion of how to balance research, teaching, and service. We then highlight strategies faculty members can use to become effective academic ringmasters. We conclude with a discussion of life outside the “big top.”

Becoming the Ringmaster: Balancing Research, Teaching, and Service

The majority of faculty members work more than 50 hours per week to meet the demands of academia (Jacobs and Winslow 2004). Most of this time is spent on the labor intensive activities of teaching and research. This leads to a question about the relationship between research and teaching. Some researchers believe that research and teaching are unrelated (Fox 1992; Hattie and Marsh 1996). Teaching and research are seen as conflicting activities, and thus spending more time on research means spending less time on teaching and vice versa. Others, however, see research and teaching as complementary activities (Kremer 1990). This means that one’s teaching can inform one’s research and research can inform one’s teaching (Smeby 1998). While most studies find that teaching and research are unrelated, their conclusions are based on examining how faculty members allocate their time to these activities (Milem et al. 2000).

We argue that, while the time demands are conflicting, engaging in both research and teaching makes one a stronger faculty member. For example, teaching may influence

faculty members' research. Specifically, class preparation can allow faculty members to explore the literature and generate new research questions (Marsh and Hattie 2002; Smeby 1998). Class discussions can also stimulate alternative ways of thinking about one's research.

In addition to teaching informing research, being engaged in research can enhance one's teaching. In fact, students respond more positively to faculty members who are actively involved in research because they are able to incorporate current literature, may be more excited about the subject matter, and appear more credible (Neumann 1994). Furthermore, teachers who are engaged in research have higher expectations for students than those who do not conduct research (Hattie and Marsh 1996). They are also more likely to promote critical thinking and help students develop a better understanding of the complexities associated with research instead of training them to accept, at face value, what they read in their texts (Marsh and Hattie 2002).

Although most studies focus on balancing research and teaching, faculty members must concurrently fulfill their service obligations. While service is an integral part of faculty life, it is also the least important for receiving tenure (Mullen and Forbes 2000). Therefore, it is important for faculty members to serve their institutions; but they must also protect the time they devote to research and teaching. However, too much time spent on service is a concern for tenure track faculty members, especially for female faculty and faculty of color who may be expected to serve on diversity-related committees in addition to their regular service obligations (Adams 2004).

Even though new faculty members are often aware of the multiple "acts" required in academia (research, teaching, and service), they may be unaware of how they, as the ringmaster, should focus their time on these "acts" in order to receive tenure and promotion (Koblinsky et al. 2006; Mullen and Forbes 2000). While these expectations will vary among institutions, and sometimes within them, it is important for new faculty members to have a clear understanding of the tenure process (Acker and Armenti 2004; Mullen and Forbes 2000; Sorcinelli 2000). For example, if the institution has written guidelines regarding the expectations for research, teaching, and service, those should be used to determine how one should allocate time.

We also recommend that new faculty members have conversations with tenured colleagues and administrators. Doing so will allow new faculty members to clarify issues that may not be explicitly stated, as well as begin to develop meaningful relationships with the tenured faculty members in their department and their department chair. Furthermore, it is necessary to revisit continually the criteria for tenure and promotion as the expectations may change over time (Acker and Armenti 2004; Austin 2002; Mullen and Forbes 2000). Understanding these expectations will enable new faculty members to become effective ringmasters.

One characteristic of all effective ringmasters is to be able to draw attention to the appropriate acts at the appropriate times. This ability requires an acute understanding on the part of the ringmaster regarding both the overall flow of the circus and the specific line-up of acts. Similarly, the effective academic has a keen awareness regarding the goals he or she would like to accomplish and an understanding of the steps it will take to accomplish those goals. Yet, beyond understanding, the effective academic must have the skills to implement the activities that will allow him or her to reach the aforementioned goals. In the following sections, we discuss strategies for effectively focusing one's attention on the "acts" of research, teaching, and service. These strategies represent best case scenarios; not all will be possible to implement given departmental and institutional constraints.

Research

Just as in a three-ring circus, one's research agenda should have several "acts" going at the same time and in different rings so one can easily redirect attention among "acts." More specifically, Zanna and Darley (1987) suggest having several research projects at different stages of development (e.g., data collection, data analysis, writing, etc.). In other words, to become an effective ringmaster, faculty members need to have several "acts" in the first years of academic life. Ideally, these should include publishing manuscripts based on the dissertation, implementing new research projects, preparing grant proposals, and submitting proposals to professional conferences.

Given that one component of tenure review is scholarly productivity, a suggested starting point for new faculty members as they settle into a new position is to prepare their dissertation for publication. However, the preferred format for disseminating one's work can vary between disciplines. While some disciplines prefer that faculty members transform their dissertation into a book, others believe it is more desirable to publish empirical articles. Thus, new faculty members should speak with tenured colleagues and administrators to determine if it is more beneficial to seek to publish the dissertation in its entirety or break it into parts and publish each part as a separate article.

In addition to publishing the dissertation, it is also necessary to develop and implement a new research agenda. New faculty members at teaching-oriented institutions may find this difficult given that the resources available differ from those they had as graduate students at their research-oriented institutions (Austin 2002). In their new institutions, they may have to adjust to higher teaching loads; limited, if any, graduate student assistance; limited or insufficient start-up packages; and inadequate research funding (Carroll 2003; Koblinsky et al. 2006). As a result, faculty members have to be creative in how they accomplish scholarly activities with limited resources.

One strategy for accomplishing scholarly activities would be implementing research projects that require minimal funding. For example, many institutions have internal funds that can be used to implement pilot projects. Pilot projects enable faculty members to collect data for publication, which then allow them to develop a track record that will aid in securing funding from external sources. Although many institutions have an office or staff person who can assist in this process, the task of finding an appropriate external funder can take more time than most faculty members anticipate.

In the interim, faculty members also have to be creative in how they pursue their initial research projects. One way to maximize one's efforts may be to integrate scholarship, teaching, and service. For example, the first author was able to integrate all three by using a service-learning assignment in a family diversity course, requiring the students to write a paper reflecting on their experiences, conducting a content analysis of the students' papers to determine the effectiveness of the assignment, and co-authoring a manuscript with a graduate student (Toews and Cerny 2006). By engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning, faculty members are able to improve their teaching strategies and practices while at the same time contributing to their scholarly productivity. However, it is important to note that institutions vary in the credence they give to the scholarship of teaching and learning. Thus, new faculty members should determine if this type of scholarship is valued at their institutions before pursuing such endeavors.

Although the above example involved working with a graduate student, another way faculty members can maximize their efforts is by involving competent undergraduate students in the research process (Lancy 2003; Page et al. 2004). This can be accomplished by bringing one's research interests into the classroom, which can pique students' interests

in the subject matter. Once their interest is aroused, students can enroll in an independent study course where they can gain a first-hand understanding of research methods and critical thinking skills (Ishiyama 2002; Ware et al. 1998). An additional benefit of student involvement is that it can increase faculty members' research productivity (Page et al. 2004; Ware et al. 1998). An important caveat is that faculty members' productivity can be compromised if appropriate care is not given to selecting students.

Another strategy for maximizing research productivity would be to prepare conference proposals. This allows one to begin developing the framework for future manuscripts (Carroll 2003). Furthermore, presenting one's work to peers in this way provides an opportunity to receive feedback from reviewers as well as conference attendees. While presenting at conferences allows faculty members to showcase their research, it also introduces them to others' research and may stimulate additional research questions (Mallard and Atkins 2004).

Perhaps a more difficult strategy, but one that can maximize scholarly productivity, is to develop collaborative relationships. While many talk about the importance of collaborating, it may be difficult to implement because it can sometimes mean having to develop expertise in a new area. We contend that, while this can take more time in the development and implementation stages, the payoffs can supersede the initial investment. For example, we developed a project that incorporated the first author's expertise in family relationships and the second author's expertise in ethnic identity to examine how personal and interpersonal variables predicted the transition to college. Although we spent considerable time familiarizing ourselves with the literature regarding college students' adjustment, the result is that we are now more productive in our scholarly output.

One critical component of being a productive scholar is allocating one's time appropriately. This is particularly relevant given that time spent on research is positively related to scholarly productivity (Marsh and Hattie 2002). In fact, Mallard and Atkins (2004) found that release time was the strongest predictor of scholarly productivity, as measured by the number of refereed journal articles, conference papers, and books. Therefore, if possible, new faculty members should seek to negotiate release time before accepting a position.

While the institution may not allocate release time, faculty members should purposely set aside time within their weekly schedules to devote to scholarly activities. Although the specific strategies vary among individuals, it is often easier to spend time on research once one has allocated time for research (Gunter and Stambach 2003). For example, blocking out certain times each day to focus on research-related activities is advisable (Boice 1992). In addition to blocking out time, it is important to create "to do" lists specifying what one hopes to accomplish during that time (Boice 1992). Specifying particular tasks allows one to experience a sense of accomplishment in a manner similar to what one might experience after completing a lecture (Carroll 2003).

With respect to creating "to do" lists, it is important to categorize tasks in manageable units (Boice 1990). Often faculty members think in terms of the end product rather than the specific tasks necessary to accomplish their goal. This can influence one's motivation as it is easier to focus on the tasks for which we feel a more immediate sense of accomplishment. Faculty members must train themselves to view the research process as similar to the teaching process in that it is composed of a series of tasks that lead to a final outcome. For example, instead of noting "work on manuscript" one might list "write literature review; write methods section; run analyses; write results" and so on. In this fashion, one is able to experience a sense of accomplishment at each stage in the process and recognize how one is moving closer to achieving the end product (Boice 1990).

While many faculty members can set aside time for research, not all follow through when faced with the daily demands of teaching. For example, time must be devoted to preparing classes, interacting with students, grading assignments, and writing exams. The consequences of not completing these tasks are more immediate and apparent (Boice 1992; Carroll 2003). Thus, it is often easier to succumb to the pressures associated with teaching as these often appear urgent. As a consequence, faculty members might compromise the time they have set aside for research in order to meet their teaching responsibilities.

One strategy for ensuring that time set aside for research is actually spent on research would be to cultivate a system of accountability, such as research circles or readings groups (Carroll 2003; Gillespie et al. 2005). Specifically, Carroll (2003) suggested that these groups “can provide the deadlines and immediate feedback that many faculty need for completing projects and exposing their work to a higher level of scrutiny” (p. 26). This accountability is beneficial as faculty members are more likely to postpone completing research related tasks because there are no immediate ramifications. However, given that research productivity is highly valued, the long-term consequences of neglecting this commitment can be detrimental to one’s academic career (e.g., merit, tenure; Wolverton 1998).

Teaching

Although most new faculty members feel fairly confident in their high-wire skills (i.e., research training), for some, animal taming (i.e., teaching) may seem like an “act” for which they have not been trained (Austin 2002). Yet, it is important to note that many have at least some exposure to teaching-related “acts” prior to assuming a faculty position. We argue that new faculty members should not discount the value of prior experiences relating to teaching. Specifically, even new faculty members who have very limited teaching experience can rely on the content they have learned in their classes and can model the example of successful teachers they have encountered.

Furthermore, before accepting a new position, faculty members should try to negotiate the courses they teach (Sorcinelli 2000). For example, if a new faculty member has previously taught a course while in graduate school, he or she could request to teach that same course at the new institution. Faculty members could also request to teach multiple sections of the same course or negotiate their teaching schedules so they teach on a certain number of days per week and devote other days completely to research. A final strategy, but one that can be difficult to maintain, especially if one is always in the building, is to meet with students only during specified office hours or by appointment.

Even for faculty members who have had previous teaching experience, many are not prepared for the challenges of teaching multiple classes. Specifically, many new faculty members feel overwhelmed with the diversity of courses they teach (Koblinsky et al. 2006). In most departments, academics are continually challenged by the demands of having to be both a generalist and a specialist, in that they are expected to have a specific area of research, but are required to teach on a broad range of topics, often outside their specific area of expertise (Ballantine 1995; Marsh and Hattie 2002). As a result, faculty members must devote the time necessary to develop that general understanding. This time must be balanced with the time necessary to stay current in one’s fields of inquiry. While a laudable goal would be to find ways to overlap one’s teaching expertise with scholarly expertise, this is not always possible. Thus, academics must find practical ways to negotiate this tension.

One way faculty members can ease the transition to teaching multiple classes would be to take advantage of opportunities for collaboration when developing courses. For example, although faculty members engage in discussions about scholarship, they are less likely to discuss pedagogy (Boice 1992). Therefore, we would suggest that new faculty members ask to examine colleagues' teaching materials for the courses they will teach (Sorcinelli 2000). This information can be helpful in terms of planning course activities and can also inform new faculty members about the instructional climate as they relate to student expectations. In addition, faculty members can search the Web for the syllabi of others who are teaching similar courses.

One potential danger for new faculty members when it comes to teaching is focusing an exorbitant amount of energy on class preparation. This is particularly relevant because research finds the amount of time spent on teaching related activities is not related to quality of instruction and in fact depresses publication productivity (Fox 1992; Marsh and Hattie 2002). While we are not encouraging faculty members to dismiss their teaching responsibilities, we are simply arguing that oftentimes new faculty can be inefficient in their use of time as it relates to instruction. For example, it is suggested that faculty members should spend no more than one and a half to three hours of preparation for each class hour (Boice 1992; Wankat 2004). While this may not be possible for new faculty members, it is an important goal toward which to strive.

Once faculty members have established a teaching routine, they can focus on integrating their scholarship and teaching. One way to accomplish this integration would be to find ways to overlap one's teaching expertise with one's scholarly expertise. However, this is not always possible. Another strategy is teaching a special topics course. Such courses can be a useful tool for exploring a research topic in greater depth. Preparing the course will allow the faculty member to become more familiar with the literature, and teaching the course can raise potential research questions and provide a forum for the discussion of related issues (Marsh and Hattie 2002; Smeby 1998).

Service

In between negotiating multiple "acts" and learning new skills, new faculty members are also faced with service responsibilities, which are analogous to the clowns. Although clowns are an integral part of every circus, they are often a distraction between the main acts (teaching and research). Similarly, too many service responsibilities can detract from scholarly productivity and quality instruction. However, some service responsibilities can provide opportunities to interact with students outside of class, form relationships with colleagues across campus, and learn about the institution (Adams 2004).

Learning about the institution is especially important given that research indicates new faculty members may not be familiar with the governance process (Koblinsky et al. 2006). Therefore, faculty members may want to be on committees where they will learn more about issues that will facilitate their transition or expose them to relevant university issues, such as search committees or committees drafting policies and procedures (Adams 2004). However, faculty members should seek to avoid committees that might address contentious issues (e.g., departmental restructuring, financial allocations) or those whose members might be at odds (Adams 2004). In addition, it is important to know the time involved in each committee assignment prior to volunteering to serve on that committee. For example, some committees meet once a year, but may require a considerable amount of work in the weeks prior to the meeting. On the other hand, some committees meet on a more frequent

basis, but preparation time is limited. Finally, to protect one's tenuous position, it is best to avoid chairing a committee until after tenure.

Another way to balance one's service responsibilities would be to integrate scholarship and teaching with service. One strategy would be to only accept community presentations related to one's research expertise or topics which one has already prepared for a class. This would involve less preparation time because faculty members are familiar with the topic. Faculty could also provide service to the profession by serving as reviewers for conference papers, manuscripts, and grant proposals. This type of service allows the faculty member to generate new ideas while also benefiting the professional community.

Life Outside the Big Top

Although becoming an effective ringmaster is crucial to one's success in academia, it is important to remember that life does exist outside the "big top." This is particularly relevant given that faculty members feel they do not have enough time to complete their numerous teaching and research responsibilities (Austin 2002; Colbeck 1998; Gunter and Stambach 2003). In fact, Colbeck (1998) reported that all faculty members in her study felt "they had more work to do than they could reasonably accomplish" (p. 663). As a result, the additional time needed to meet the increasing research and teaching demands often occurs at the expense of personal and family time (Gunter and Stambach 2003; Hattie and Marsh 1996). Faculty members, particularly women, tend to sacrifice time spent relaxing, exercising, sleeping, and socializing in order to meet these demands (Acker and Armenti 2004; Gunter and Stambach 2003).

Furthermore, some faculty members never feel as if they are doing "a good enough job" (Acker and Armenti 2004, p. 16). As a result, they often work harder and longer, which is detrimental to their physical and psychological health (Acker and Armenti 2004; Colbeck 1998; Gunter and Stambach 2003). Specifically, previous researchers have found that faculty members, particularly women and tenure-track faculty, report high levels of stress, illness, fatigue, health difficulties, and social isolation (Acker and Armenti 2004; Gunter and Stambach 2003; Moyer et al. 1999). Despite these physical and psychological health concerns, they are expected to "look relaxed and on top of things rather than frenzied, fatigued, [and] malcontent" (Acker and Armenti 2004, p. 13). By denying the struggles they face, faculty members miss opportunities to receive moral support from one another (Acker and Armenti 2004; Moyer et al. 1999). This can exacerbate one's feelings of isolation, thus making it more important to develop strategies to nurture one's life outside the "big top."

One such strategy is for faculty members to schedule personal time in the same way they schedule research and teaching activities. For example, faculty members should write personal time into their weekly calendars. They should also make appointments to spend time with family and friends or schedule a weekly lunch "date" with a friend or colleague. Another strategy is to schedule time to pursue recreational interests. It is also important for faculty members to recognize their needs and thus not feel guilty for taking this much-deserved personal time (Acker and Armenti 2004). Furthermore, similar to the circus, one perk of academia is taking time off between "shows." Faculty members should use this time effectively to rest, rejuvenate, and evaluate their work without the deadlines and pressures that are faced during the academic year.

Conclusion

The changing nature of academia has required faculty members to become more efficient in meeting the increasing demands of research, teaching, and service. Our primary goal was to focus upon and summarize strategies for becoming an effective academic ringmaster. We provided suggestions for developing one's research agenda while providing quality instruction, meeting one's service obligations, and maintaining a life outside academia. We believe, if one is able to become the ringmaster of his or her own three-ring circus, one's academic career can indeed become The Greatest Show on Earth®!

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