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2. STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING SANITY AND SUCCESS

Advice for Junior Faculty

INTRODUCTION

The number of women enrolled in graduate programs in the U.S. exceeds that of men (Snyder, 2009). Nevertheless, women have not advanced through the academic ranks at the same rate as their male counterparts (Mason & Goulden, 2004). Although the path toward tenure can be treacherous for anyone, female faculty members face unique challenges in the academe. This chapter integrates previous research with personal experience in an effort to provide practical advice to female assistant professors.

CHALLENGES

Office Politics and Toxic Work Environments

Harold Lasswell (1936) defines politics as “who gets what, when, and how.” This classic definition also applies to institutions of higher education as competition for scarce resources fuels office politics. Faculty members might compete for research grants, office space, graduate assistants, sabbaticals, etc. In addition, office politics becomes complicated if there is personal conflict among faculty members within a department. Junior faculty must learn to navigate the various landmines embedded in office politics by studying personalities, power, and history of the department and larger organization. In addressing the discord that junior faculty members sometimes experience when one of their proposals is rejected, Kathryn Hume (2003) asserts:

Most departmental issues affect individual self-interests, and assistant professors must learn to recognize the self-interested kernel in their own suggestions as well as the self-interest they can see all too easily in others. They must work with the interests of others as much as possible and be prepared to compromise. Those at the intellectual and political extremes of the department tend to make demands that violate departments’ boundaries of self-interest and collegial criticism. Those whose positions lie to one side of the middle but do not come across as extreme have some chance of leading the department a few steps in their preferred direction. A year or two later, the department may be ready to take another step in that same direction (n.p).

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Although junior faculty should avoid explicit disputes that occur in departmental office politics, they should always be aware that politics is inherent in any organization—the trick is in knowing the rules of the game and the players while maintaining personal integrity.

In contrast, some departments are described as toxic work environments, better known as snake pits. Characteristics include a persistent division among faculty members within a department, personal conflicts, and high turnover among junior faculty, sabotage, and workplace bullying. While there are good sources of advice offered in the Chronicle of Higher Education and on the blog <http://bulliedacademics.blogspot.com>, I recommend that junior faculty members develop an exit strategy and leave as quickly as possible. One individual alone cannot change the culture of an organization, senior faculty members are unlikely to leave, and it is not worth your mental and physical health to grieve your case. Furthermore, sticking around will negatively impact your scholarly productivity and ruin your career.

Gendered Institutions

Organizational processes that on the surface may appear gender neutral are a reflection of the historic separation between public and private spheres that establish a gender-based division of labor, organizational structure, and processes (Acker, 1992). In higher education, “tenure was historically premised on the married male professor as a universal model and the linear career trajectory in academe assumed that someone else would be taking care of family and domestic responsibilities” (Sotirin, 2008, p. 260). The process of achieving tenure is a perfect example of Joan Williams’ (2000) concept of the ideal worker norm in which work is structured in a way that assumes traditional gender roles of men as the breadwinners and women as the stay-at-home wives. The demands of tenure-track positions in terms of teaching, research, and service often result in faculty members working above and beyond a typical 40 hour workweek. Jacobs and Winslow (2004) found significant correlation between publication rates and working at least 60 hours per week. Structuring work in a way that positions men’s lives as normal and women’s as problematic disadvantages female faculty members, particularly for women who are primary caregivers for children or elderly parents. Research by Mason and Goulden (2004) provides evidence that having children less than 6 years of age within 5 years after the completion of a PhD has a negative impact on tenure of the mothers, but not the fathers.

In addition, gender bias is also reflected in perceptions of success between men and women as female faculty members continue to be subjected to ascribed reasons for success such as preferential hiring or being in the right place at the right time. In contrast, the success of male faculty members is attributed to achievement based on knowledge, skills, and ability. In a study by Deaux and Emswiller (1974), participants were more likely to attribute skill to successful task performance by

males while luck was attributed to successful task performance by females. In academia this results in men being judged on potential rather than past performance or experience compared to women with similar credentials judged more rigorously. For example, a male faculty member with three publications might be perceived as demonstrating potential while a female faculty member with three publications might be perceived as barely meeting standards. In one experimental study that compared male and female resumes, participants were more likely to hire the males, ranking them higher in terms of teaching, research and service even though the resumes were randomly assigned male and female names (Steinpreis, Anders, & Ritzke, 1999). Similarly, Heilman (2001) provides evidence that the absence of women in leadership positions in many organizations is the result of gender bias in the evaluation process.

The first step toward change is to recognize that there is a problem. In order for your colleagues to recognize the problem you must raise awareness.

Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance is the Holy Grail for women in higher education who also serve as primary caregivers of children or the elderly—stories exist and we continue to seek it, however, no one has ever seen it. Peers often ask me how I balance teaching, research, and service along with family responsibilities. I inform them that I don't balance anything—I'm constantly juggling competing duties. When I am caught-up on work in one venue I am behind in another—a vicious cycle of falling behind and catching up. There is no separate sphere of work and home as a great deal of work occurs at home. Even when I work a “regular” day at the office, I return home, eat dinner and take a short break, then get back on the computer to work until bedtime.

In recent years many universities in the U.S. have implemented policies intended to promote work-life balance. Policies vary and may include parental leave beyond the Family Medical Leave Act, tenure-clock stop, active-service/modified duties, and child care arrangements. According to the Center for the Education of Women at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor (2008), unpaid leave beyond FMLA was offered at 44% of the colleges and universities within their sample. In comparison, faculty members find themselves negotiating on a case-by-case basis at institutions where formal parental leave policies do not exist (Gilbert, 2008). This may or may not be beneficial to faculty members and is contingent on a variety of factors including the receptiveness of deans and department chairs, teaching loads, system policies, etc. Regardless, over an extended period of time, the absence of a formal policy may contribute to perceptions of unequal treatment as faculty members received different terms and conditions of leave.

Tenure-clock stop allows faculty members to pause the tenure clock for significant life events such as serious medical conditions or for the birth or adoption of a child. While faculty may be on leave during a tenure clock stop, it is not required at

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many universities. There are wide variations of tenure-clock stop policies across universities in the U.S., however, research institutions offer tenure-clock stops at twice the rate of other institutions (Center for the Education of Women, 2008). The process for requesting a tenure clock stoppage also varies as some institutions provide automatic clock stops and others have a protocol for written requests.

Active service-modified duties provides reduced teaching loads with minimal pay reduction for faculty members who demonstrate primary care responsibilities for newborns or an adopted child less than five years of age. For example, the University of California at Berkeley provides modified duties for three months prior and one year following birth or adoption. On-site childcare is less prevalent on campuses, where it does exist there are often long waiting lists. My own daughter was on a waiting list for 18 months—she was accepted the year I left to work at another institution. Some universities partner with service providers. Funding for childcare is typically paid by parents although some universities provide subsidies.

Despite the increase in the number and types of policies designed to achieve work-life balance, many women engage in bias avoidance behavior by refusing to take advantage of the policies out of fear that it will negatively impact their chances of tenure and promotion. In a comparison of four universities, my colleagues and I found that 64% of the 247 respondents feared being held to a higher standard during tenure review if a tenure clock stop was used (Wyatt-Nichol, Cardona, & Drake, 2012). Other studies (Yoest & Rhoads, 2004; Fothergill & Felty, 2003; Frasch, Mason, Goulden, & Hoffman, 2007) have produced similar results.

Policies designed to promote work-life balance will not address the problem of structural inequality reflected in the ideal worker norm, however, it is a step in the right direction. These policies did not exist at my former institution when I gave birth to my daughter in 2006. Newly minted PhDs on the market should carefully examine work-life balance policies of potential employers. Junior faculty working at institutions where such policies are absent should work to develop and propose policies that promote work-life balance (but please review the section on office politics prior to your endeavour).

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Understand the Tenure Requirements in Your Department

Tenure requirements vary across universities and across departments within universities. Some departments value journal publications over books. There may also be ranking based on the “quality” of the journal or prestige of publication press. Some organizations place higher value on applied research while others value theoretical publications. Although grant funding is valued by all universities, it is essential at research intensive universities. Read and understand the requirements within your own department and then recognize that tenure is still a subjective process and a moving target. Regarding subjectivity, Keashly and Neuman assert:

Faculty members are also evaluated using subjective, often ambiguous, criteria, as evident in reviews of scholarly/intellectual contributions, department- and college-wide service, continuing growth, and community service. Few institutions have clear standards for judging such contributions and, instead, rely on general guidelines or descriptive criteria for making such evaluations (n.p.).

Regarding tenure as a moving target, the three universities where I have been employed were all reviewing and revising their tenure policies. A search on tenure policy changes on Google or the Chronicle of Higher Education on any given day will yield thousands of results relevant to tenure policy changes. The result of these changes is that assistant professors coming up for tenure today will be subject to more rigorous standards than their senior colleagues were subjected to decades prior. This may cause an initial tinge of resentment among junior faculty, however, my advice is to let it go and move on—nothing is going to change this situation.

On a practical note, document everything! Update your vita every time that you provide a presentation, serve on a new committee, teach a new course, etc. If you are really organized, you might start a binder from day one. Otherwise, keep a box or shelf reserved to store all materials that will be placed in your dossier. In the area of service, record the number of meetings attended, your role (e.g. committee member, faculty advisor, or consultant), and documents or services produced. When it is time to submit your dossier you will realize that you have accomplished more than you can recall.

Develop a Strategy for Publishing

I have three key strategies for publishing. First, I monitor calls for papers like a hawk. Second, I often collaborate with other junior faculty in my department. This strategy builds relationships while working toward the mutual goal of tenure. While it is still important to individually publish, most departments recognize co-authored publications. Third, I present all manuscripts at conferences prior to journal submissions. Conference participants always provide useful feedback that helps to improve the quality of the manuscript. In addition, conferences provide the opportunity to network and learn about other opportunities for collaboration within the discipline.

Be strategic about publication efforts. For example, understand the turn-around time at different journals. I have one manuscript that took four years between notification of acceptance to the actual publication date. In addition, recognize the writing style of the journal and the audience of readers prior to submitting your work. Develop a thick skin. Early in my career I received a rejection letter for one of my manuscripts. I sent it to a different journal and received a second rejection. This manuscript now lies in a pile of dead papers. I had serious considerations about changing professions until a well-respected and prolific colleague pulled me aside to show me some of the vile comments that he received from reviewers.

Continually Assess Your Performance in the Classroom

While the perennial debate over the value of student evaluations rages on in academic discourse, evaluations will be included in your dossier. Senior faculty members recognize that evaluations, as a measure of satisfaction, often reflect student satisfaction with grades or course content. For example, most faculty members in our department who teach statistics or other analytical courses receive lower ratings for these courses than the other courses they teach. Nevertheless, continuous negative comments across courses and over a period of time is a red flag that something is awry.

Alternatives to traditional student evaluations include mid-semester evaluations and peer-reviewed class observations. A mid-semester evaluation provides you the opportunity to make adjustments in the classroom. Peer-reviewed observation of teaching may seem intimidating at first; however, it can help you identify your strengths and areas for improvement in the classroom as well as provide valuable insight into effective pedagogical techniques.

Another alternative to traditional student evaluations is self-assessment. What are your goals and objectives for the course? Is this a new course or one that you teach on a regular basis? If you teach this course on a regular basis, what have you changed this semester? What are the student learning goals and how are they being measured? A self-reflective narrative that documents student performance along with your overall experience is helpful to maintaining positive performance and allows colleagues to get a broader view of your teaching.

Establish Positive Relationships

Build positive relationships in your department, across campus, and within your discipline. Attend plays, musical performances, guest speaker series, etc. and you will begin to feel that you belong to a broader campus community. It is particularly important to establish new social networks when you are geographically removed from former social networks and family. At my former institution I was 1,400 miles removed from family and friends. Similarly, my colleague was equidistance from the West Coast. We met weekly for lunch and often spent holidays together. After I gave birth to my daughter, colleagues pooled resources to deliver dinners to our home. There were also occasions when I relied upon colleagues to babysit. I have since returned to the East Coast but still maintain contact with several of my former colleagues. They provided informal support where formal institutional support was lacking.

Develop Perspective

When we suffer mental exhaustion we lose sight of our own opportunities and the struggles of others. At my first university job in Virginia I would occasionally complain that the office was too cold from the air conditioning in the summer. I would then drive to the 50th street gate of Newport News Shipbuilding to remind myself

of the endurance required by my mother to work in extreme heat. This allowed me to put into perspective the opportunities and convenience of my current position. Sometimes I complain about traveling. I attended 9 conferences last year and 5 this year. “Please, I don’t want to go to Vegas, New Orleans, New York, Toronto, etc.” Stepping back and putting this into perspective reveals the absurdity. First, I know many friends that would love to visit these cities. Second, I am grateful that my department had funding for my professional travel.

Always guard your ability to interpret behaviour, actions, and events from a different angle or another person’s point of view—this is perspective.

Develop a Plan B

The number of contingent faculty has steadily increased over the years. According to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (2012), 77.8% of faculty members were tenured or tenure-track in 1970 compared to only 50% in 2011. Whether the increased number and extended length of service in non-tenure track positions is voluntary on the part of the employee or the result of institutional practice is debatable. Berger, Kirshstein, and Rowe (2001) report that between 1993 and 1998, 40% of all institutions implemented policies to reduce the number of full-time faculty. One strategy involves replacing departing or retiring tenured faculty with full-time non-tenure track faculty, 16% of tenure-track replacements were filled with fixed term contracts. Other strategies include downsizing the number of full-time faculty by increasing the course load, size of classes, or simply reducing the number of courses offered.

In addition, tenure does not guarantee lifetime employment. Several years ago, the president at my former university declared financial exigency due to state budget cuts. This gave him the ability to suspend the academic handbook. All faculty and staff were called to a meeting in the main auditorium. At the meeting the president, along with a budget committee, revealed three departments that were being cut. The elimination of the departments resulted in the elimination of several tenured faculty members, many of whom were employed for decades. Similarly, many universities across the U.S. have eliminated programs in recent years as a result of declining revenue.

What will you do if your current position is eliminated? Will you be able to find employment at another university or will you change careers? I have a painting in my office of a hotdog vendor on the beach where I grew up. Underneath the painting is an engraved caption “If all else fails, I’ll sell hotdogs at Buckroe Beach.” This is a gift from my mother-in-law and it is my original plan B. Now that I have a family to support it is time to revise the original plan.

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