The Balancing Act for New Educators

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Abstract

Tenure-track positions in the field of Engineering Technology give new faculty many advantages including benefits, status, prestige, a say in governance, job security, legitimacy and academic freedom. These positions make hard demands on personal relationships and family as the new faculty member is asked to embrace his new passion—academe. Some have suggested that given the monastic roots of academia, a marriage analogy is not so far fetched.

Teaching, research and service, the trinity of promotion and tenure, leave many assistant professors exhausted and glassy-eyed. Many new faculty members are pushed to make hard choices. Do they do what they need to do to keep the job or do they mow the grass, makes home repairs, cook a meal, toss in a load of laundry, or watch the kids play ball?
Chronic conflict and stressors can trap new faculty early in their careers, causing serious health problems in the following years.

Academia may not be the healthiest of working environments. The pace of change and uncertainty in the global environment multiplies the imbalances between professional and personal lives. "Unfortunately, the balance of nature decrees that a super-abundance of dreams is paid for by a growing potential for nightmares." Those who are successful in this environment have mastered the art of flexibility.

This paper delineates research and practical suggestions from a woman's point of view, for surviving the first five years of a tenure-track teaching career in Engineering Technology. A first academic job does not have to be the worst five years of one's life. It is often a craggy path that can cause anxiety for even an experienced climber, but it can also be an exhilarating rush. Most college professors say they derive great satisfaction as they see their students cross the stage at graduation. There is sheer ecstasy in having survived the rigor of the journey to tenure.

Introduction

"I acknowledge that the balance I have achieved between work and family roles comes at a cost, and every day I must weigh whether I live with that cost happily or guiltily, or whether some other lifestyle entails trade-offs I might accept more readily. It is always my choice: to change what I cannot tolerate, or tolerate what I cannot, or will not, change." ~ Melinda M. Marshall [1]

The independence and flexibility of academic positions is often incorrectly identified both by individuals drawn to academic careers and by the public. It is a well-known fact that many individuals are attracted to the apparent job characteristics, like autonomy and flexibility, in the world of academia.[2] Nevertheless, many academicians "find that in the early years...the time required to maintain a balanced life is not available" and thus find themselves "trapped by the contradiction built into the academic career."[3] Although flexibility is an advantage for non-tenured and tenured faculty positions, the reduction in time at the office and in taking summers off is more likely a disadvantage for individuals facing tenure review. The expectations of flexibility and balance versus the reality of the pre-tenure experience can be a source of contradiction and frustration for many beginning professors in Engineering Technology education.

Many have heard the phrase "married to one's career." Many a professor will tell you that this is a factual statement. To be successful in academia, one must live, breathe and eat academia. If one is married when she hires on in academia, be the demands of an academic career can cause one to cheat in time spent with a spouse. The new career may trap one in a bigamous relationship, so to speak.

The Basics

So why should there be concern about survival in the first five years in the field of academia? One reason is that the employment outlook for academics in the United States show that postsecondary positions will increase by 36% or more through 2012.[4] This tells us that the demand for new teachers should increase. Projected growth in college and university enrollment over the next decade is due to retirement of faculty, as well as increased enrollment numbers. The enrollment increase stems largely from the expected increase in the population of those 18 to 24 year old.[4] Companies requiring undergraduate degrees as a stipulation for hiring or job retention also affect enrollment. One way or another, academic institutions will be required to hire teachers, in order to keep up with the demands. If the numbers are true, then more and more individuals will be entering the academic arena and be faced with the balancing act.[4]

Competition for faculty positions causes concern. More and more people are getting advanced degrees, so the pool of possible candidates is increasing. With the rise of distance education, it has become easier for individuals to attain advanced degrees while working full-time. Ultimately, this increases the number of people meeting the requirements for an academic position.

If one has always worked in academia or for a university in some capacity, this may seem quite redundant. For those coming into the field of Engineering Technology education from another type industry like manufacturing or service, the information within this paper may be invaluable.

The dark cloud that looms over academic careers is the budgets cuts higher education continues to face, leaving many institutions no choice but to use more adjuncts and lecturers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that these positions will continue to increase. Even full-time faculty may be hired under different circumstances, such as limited contracts or visiting appointments.[5]

Gender Differences

Research indicates few differences in the ways that men and women respond to acute stressors in the workplace. It can be said that the academic road is difficult for both men and women, but women do experience more chronic stressors, which are pervasive in academia, than their male counterparts. Examples of these stressors are the glass ceiling, role conflict, harassment, maternity issues and tokenism.[6]

Women are rare in the upper echelons of academia. Women represent 27 percent of all deanships in academia. With regard to their leadership of professional colleges like law and medical schools, the number are even less. Females hold a mere eight percent of all law school deanships and three percent of medical school deanships.[7] Only 19.3 percent of all presidents of colleges and universities in this country are women. However, 70 percent of these women presidents head schools with 3,000 or fewer students, religious or women's colleges, or two-year institutions. Only 2 percent of all women presidents head major research universities.[8]

The idea that women and minorities are kept from these higher echelons been an ongoing debate in the workplace. This invisible barrier, often referred to as the glass ceiling, often prevents any such advancement in companies and organizations, including academe. Madden (2004) concludes, "If glass ceilings existed, they would allow people to see through to the world above them. Because glass is clear, those existing under such a ceiling might not even notice initially that a barrier was in place, which separated them from higher levels. Yet if they tried to pass through, they would quickly learn that the ceiling prevented any such rise."[9]

Another major stressor for those on the tenure path is role conflict. The amount of workload and the number of different roles one must play in the academic workplace is mind-boggling. Although, both men and women in the academic setting face these issues, one area of interest that men do not have to face is the maternal wall. Women often find that their career opportunities are limited after having children. Co-workers and superiors may assume these women to be no longer committed to their careers, which may ultimately influence tenure, promotion, and other opportunities for advancement.[6]

Once a woman receives promotion in academia, dealing with negative self-thoughts of tokenism can create stress. For the few women that do penetrate the system, the possibility of being viewed as a token is inevitable. Tokenism is associated with exclusion from informal networks, stereotyping, discrimination, and prejudice, according to social psychology literature. Recent data from MIT reported in the HHMI Bullet, indicates that women scientists experience marginalization and are excluded from high-level decision-making.[6] Again, these are only examples, but being cognizant of these issues can only help in the process of tenure.

Lastly, sexual harassment, inappropriate behavior and discrimination are common stressors women face in the workplace. The phrase, "it's a man's world," comes to mind when thinking about women working in more non-traditional or male-dominated fields like engineering

technology. A woman may face things like, inappropriate jokes, unwanted touching, and even requests for dates. An article by Nelson and Burke discusses the impact of these stressors.

> Each of these stressors links to increased susceptibility to several kinds of distress, including burnout, lower levels of perceived well-being, and poor satisfaction with job and life. While men are more likely to suffer serious chronic illnesses, such as heart disease and hypertension, because of stress, women tend to suffer from a much wider variety of psychological and physical complaints. Women report more overall distress than men do and tend to experience higher levels of psycho physiological symptoms in response to stress--headaches, insomnia, muscle tension, anxiety, hostility, dizziness, nausea, pounding heart, lack of motivation, and various acute and chronic illnesses. Research indicates that parental work stress is associated with higher levels of parent-child conflict-- which suggests that it is not just women, but also their children, who are negatively affected by work stress. Stressors are interactive and cumulative: The more stressors one experiences, the greater the likelihood of stress-related health problems.[6]

The Academic Trinity

Even though it is probably the basis for hiring, the most difficult skill to learn in the first year as an assistant professor is the art of teaching. One of the most time consuming aspects of teaching is class preparation. From PowerPoint slides to course packet creation, the time spent preparing is considerable. Class preparation is a continual refinement process that occurs long after day one. As a result, it is quite common to spend a disproportionate amount of time in the first year on teaching. In order to an article written by Whitten and Anderson, "a career as a 'tenure-track' faculty member in higher education is made up of four components: teaching, service to the institution, service to the community, and professional/scholarly development, which includes publishing, research and grants. The degree of emphasis placed upon on each of these areas varies."[10]

A new faculty member in Engineering Technology must find out how to balance the three elements of the Academic Holy Trinity --Teaching, Research, and Service. From experience, most tenured faculty will share the advice that research comes first at all costs and the others balance out. There is some thought that early retirement packages may cause senior faculty to reduce their research efforts. This might be a good opportunity for new professors to find a partner for a research project.[11]

Suggestions

Although the suggestions for surviving the first five years in a tenure track position are innumerable, here are a few that the authors find priceless in their quest for tenure. Universities rarely give new tenure-track faculty a step-by-step guide to getting tenure. If the guide exists, it is usually generic and lacks specificity. Outlined below are several crucial factors that a new faculty member in the area Engineering Technology should consider during the tenure journey.

- Start preparing a P & T Document
  Do not wait until the month before going up for tenure to start working on the promotion and tenure document (P & T document). Find out what guidelines or templates are used. Tenured colleague's documents are another good source of information in preparing a P & T Document.
- Find out who your friends are
  Upon entering the academic arena, everyone may seem very friendly and give a welcome with open arms, but this may not always been the case. Remember: Academe is a competitive marketplace and colleagues are quick to take another's idea and run with it.
- Find a mentor
  Mentorship is a key area for both the mentor and the mentored. Finding someone that has experience in academia and similar interests can benefit the new comer. Mentoring is a two-way street, as it gives credit to the mentor for helping junior faculty and helps the junior faculty in terms opportunities that may not exist without the mentor, like co-authorship grants, journals, etc.
- Start writing with co-authors
  Not feeling comfortable writing a paper alone is common for the beginning academic, especially if entering from another field. Finding other colleagues that hold similar interests and enjoy writing is critical in the initial stages of an academic's career. It is, at times, easier to write as a team than to write alone. There is power in numbers!
- Publish or Perish
  Take it from those who have passed through the tenure gate. One must publish in academe to succeed. Need I say more?
- Find out what form of writing/research is going to help you get tenure.
  A difficult question to answer is where to focus one's research efforts. If an answer can be found, the following guidelines can be useful:
  - Journals: There are many areas in a given discipline to begin one's writing focus, however, the academic clock is ticking and captivating papers are generally not completed in a short amount of time. With the limited amount of time in mind, to borrow a baseball analogy, it is important to 'hit a few singles'. Professor Sam Peltzman, the Ralph and Dorothy Keller Distinguished Service Professor of Economics, says "you don't expect [an assistant professor] to have hit home runs by the first review. But, you do need to see the potential for hitting home runs in the future."[12]
  - Grants
    Anytime an organization receives external funding like grants, it benefits all involved. Once a grant is received, use the research to write a paper for publication in a journal. Be resourceful in your writing endeavors!
  - Conferences
    Writing and presenting for conferences related to a discipline is a nice way to get feedback on one's writing. With this feedback, a resourceful academic can revise the work and insert additional research then resubmit the paper for publication in a journal.
- Learn the rules, walk the walk and talk the talk
  Although this should go without saying, learning the way the organization works is important upon entering any career field. Understanding the policies and procedures set

forth by the institution is important, not to mention actually following them, and can help one gain respect. Following these rules is key to success in academia.

Health

The glue that holds it all together in the balancing act is your health. Do not do things that will hinder your performance at work. Many times professionals will rely on things like smoking, drinking, or other harmful products to enhance their performance, but maintaining a healthy lifestyle could be the most important part of one's success. Being able to control stress without the use of chemical vices is key. Instead, one might try a simple maintenance plan for oneself.

So many times, we let our health and well-being take second fiddle to everything else in our lives. Things like annual check-ups with your physician, eye care professional and dentist seem to be low on the priority list. Take time to take care of yourself. In the workplace, we often see people that are so sick that they can barely function, but they just have to get that project done. How about the guy with the excruciating toothache that didn't have time to go to the dentist so he would load up on pain killers and in the end had to miss work due to a severe infection. Does this sound stupid? Well, it really happened. Wouldn't it make more sense to get one's health in order so he could perform at the optimum level?

All of this sounds simple, but only if one can prioritize important elements.

Conclusions

Our lives, whether we are at work or play, pivot on a wheel of ambiguity. The key to survival in this improbable world of academia, specifically Engineering Technology, is mastering the art of flexibility. In the role of professor, one must tell students that they have to be flexible in order to survive in their field of choice. One way to practice what one preaches is to accomplish this is through creative thinking or finding ways to defeat obstacles that are not so obvious to us. Hopefully, this paper as provided some guidelines and helpful ways to achieve this goal. The intent of this paper was to propose realistic ways to balance one's professional and personal life while working in such a dynamic world, otherwise known as academia.

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