

Balancing Professional and Personal Life to Achieve Significance in an Academic Career

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Abstract

We encourage new engineering faculty members to seek significance, not just success. Success is often defined by numbers (numbers of publications, dollars of research funding, performance on student evaluations). Significance is harder to define. We suggest that a professor has obtained some degree of significance when he is consistently living within his principles, achieving the results he wants to achieve in his professional and personal life. On the professional side of life, significance frequently means having an important impact upon our students, our university, and/or our research field.

We develop a number of strategies that will help a new professor to achieve professional and personal significance in his life, while still performing at the standards required to get tenure and promotion. To be able to do this, the professor first needs to truly understand who he is and what he really wants to accomplish in his academic career. The next step is for him to understand what his university really wants him to do. Once these two crucial tasks have been done, we develop strategies for increasing the significance of a young professor's teaching and research. This involves setting realistic goals and using good time management techniques to obtain them. We suggest methods whereby a professor can accomplish more than one task at the same time. Examples include how to combine teaching and research, how to combine consulting and teaching, and how to combine personal and professional activities. There are other strategies that will be described in this paper that can help to increase a professor's significance. This paper will help assistant professors develop a plan to increase their significance while still getting tenure.

Rationale for paper

Our basic rationale for this paper is that new engineering faculty members should seek to have a

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significant impact in their career, rather just seek success. Success is often defined in terms of numbers (number of publications, dollar value of grants obtained, performance on teaching evaluations). Obtaining a given set of numbers gives one the impression that he has succeeded. However, while achieving significance may be harder to define, we believe it is a more important concept to have as a basis for guiding our careers.

Most engineering faculty went into our profession because we wanted to accomplish more than just becoming a successful engineer. Among the goals we may have had are to impact students through teaching and mentoring. Another common purpose is to have an impact through the excellence of the research that we conduct.

Before we can begin to deal with issues such as balancing our personal and professional lives, we need to decide what significance means to us, and how we will use our professional and personal lives to achieve it. Once we sort out this issue, we can then begin to work on balancing the personal and professional aspects of our lives.

This paper is partially based on the authors' own experiences in getting tenured and promoted. The first author has presented two papers at regional ASEE meetings^{1,2} that overlap some of the concepts we are discussing in this paper. The two authors both now serve in administrative positions where we supervise other engineering faculty. Dr. Jordan serves as Mechanical Engineering Program Chair at Louisiana Tech University. Dr. Elmore serves as an Academic Director leading the Chemical Engineering, Civil Engineering, and Geosciences programs at Louisiana Tech. We have as part of our responsibilities the duty to help mentor younger faculty through the tenure process. We have seen some of our younger faculty make choices that caused them not to survive. Excellent books by Steven Covey³ and Richard Swenson⁴ were examined as part of this study.

Understanding yourself and your university

One basic step is for each of us to really understand who we are, and what we really want out of life. Many engineers find this type of reflection difficult for it requires more philosophical thinking than they are used to doing in their everyday engineering practice. However this reflection is an absolutely crucial first step. For example both of the authors have their families, community service and church activities as priorities in their lives. We want to make sure that we do not achieve professional success at the expense of these. The first author is a faculty advisor to one student group. He is also interested in photography and has been involved in politics at a significant level (including being an alternate at his party's national convention one year). The second author serves as a faculty advisor to two student groups, is a co-leader with Boy Scouts and directs youth activities in community service. We are not suggesting that every professor should have our interests, but that all professors do have some interests that must be taken into consideration when deciding how to achieve professional significance.

Significance for the authors involves being satisfied with what we are doing in a number of areas of life, as described above. While it may be hard to define, we believe it is a more important concept than success. For example, we personally want to have an impact upon our students, our families, our churches, and the community at large. Being significant is not just obtaining a certain number of publications or a certain level of research funding.

The “search for significance” certainly affects the assistant professor’s choice of employer. We have deliberately chosen to work at a moderately sized university (with an enrollment of about 10,000, including approximately 2,000 in the College of Engineering and Science). We believe this professional choice allows us to pursue the other things we also regard as important in life.

The importance of this first step has been emphasized in the ASEE paper by Salem⁵. He writes that professors should know themselves, starting with their personal goals and objectives as well as the requirements to reach them. He writes that they should understand how their personality interacts with others. Taking a common personality profile test may help them in this process of understanding themselves.

If a professor has a family, the family members must be taken into consideration when deciding upon a choice of employer. Many authors have made this point. One engineering example of this was provided by Rose⁶. He discusses the need to have spouses be in agreement with these fundamental career choices. This also will require some adjustments to each other’s schedules. We agree with Rose when he wrote:⁶ *“It is important to schedule time for personal activities. Too often we tend to place greater significance on our professional commitments leaving our personal life to fit in wherever it can...Keeping a balance between professional and personal activities requires the prioritization and scheduling of both activities simultaneously so that our professional and personal lives can exist in harmony. This requires coordination of schedules of everyone in the family and utilizing flexibility in schedules, when needed.”*

Once a young professor has decided who he really is, he can then decide what he wants to accomplish in his academic career. The next step is to determine what his university (or potential new university) requires of him to be successful (get tenured). There are likely to be some sort of written statements as to what is expected of someone before he can get tenure. However, many universities have unwritten rules that are often more detailed and may be more rigorous than the official rules. The new professor should speak to faculty members who have just received tenure in order to determine what standards they really had to meet.

Once a professor has evaluated who he is, and what his university really wants, then he can evaluate his chances for success at that university. He then needs to determine how well his personal goals and his university’s goals overlap. We agree with the perspective of Homkes, et al.⁷, when they wrote: *“As faculty members, our mission is thus to determine what areas are important to our schools and determine if these areas fit into our own personal value system.”*

There are three possible combinations that could result:

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1. The professor's perspective on what he wants is compatible with what his university really wants. He is in a good situation, to be successful at his university he only needs to perform up to his capabilities.
2. The professor's perspective on what he wants may be compatible with what his university really wants. If he is in this situation, he may need to tweak his own plans a little bit to increase the chances of success (tenure). However, we recommend that the professor should not change his plans so much that they no longer reflect what he really believes. We believe it is more important for a professor to be true to what he really wants out of life than it is to get tenure. If a professor pursues significance on his own terms, he needs to recognize that not getting tenure is a possibility. We agree with the point one of the authors made in the paper by Porter, et al.⁸ when they wrote "*I understand the general requirements that are placed on tenure, but I will not sacrifice my family life to obtain tenure.*"
3. The professor's perspective on what he wants is not compatible with what his university really wants. If a professor is in this situation, we recommend that he seriously (and in the near future) begin looking for another opportunity that more nearly fits his own goals. There are several possibilities. One of them is switch to a non-tenure track lecturer position at the professor's university (or another university). This approach has been favorably recommended in an ASEE paper by Bell, et al.⁹ Another option is for the professor to seek employment at another university whose goals are more in alignment with his own. A third option is to consider leaving academia. However, we would encourage this as only a last resort. If you are attending this ASEE conference (or even just reading this paper), you are probably more interested in the teaching side of your profession than many of your colleagues. We believe our profession needs more such dedicated teachers and that your staying in the profession in some capacity is to be encouraged.

The rest of our paper assumes that the professor is in one of the first two categories above, that he has a real possibility of success at his own university, and would like to develop a strategy to increase his probability of tenure and promotion.

Developing a plan for significance

In order to achieve significance, the professor probably needs to plan for it. Most of us are not so talented that we can achieve this without some deliberate planning. The professor needs to plan for achieving significance in teaching, research, and service.

Teaching plan

In our view teaching is at the heart of what a university is supposed to do. To be a significant professor we believe you need to be a good teacher. This is not easy for a new faculty member who may have had no formal training in teaching when he was hired.

We believe that a young professor should seek out a mentor, a more senior faculty member who can help him get started in the teaching part of his career. This person can help him as he learns how to teach, as well as help him understand the culture of his university (both the students and the faculty/staff perspectives on good teaching).

There are several practical steps that can be done to make this transition easier.

1. If possible, teach fewer courses more often rather than many different courses. This would allow the professor to spend the additional time needed to get a research program started, while still doing a good job of teaching.
2. Strive for excellence in teaching, but do not worry about perfection. Some faculty try to get everything perfect, spending too much time on teaching preparation and not enough on research. This does not mean doing a mediocre performance in the class room. It is more like getting a 90% grade in teaching and not worrying about getting a 99% grade. This means the professor must set boundaries as to the amount of time he will spend in teaching preparation.
3. Seek out professional development opportunities to improve the professor's teaching. This may be seminars at his own university, or continuing development classes offered by a professional society or another university.
4. The professor must also set boundaries on the time he will spend doing research so it does not interfere with his teaching.
5. Create courses in the professor's areas of interest. The professor will enjoy them more, and he will produce happy students who now have more options of what to take.
6. Be innovative in teaching. Try new things in the classroom. They will not all work, but the professor should not let this stop him. The authors are both using more active learning concepts in our courses. This does mean less lecturing, but it does not mean less work. To do active learning well, it will take some significant preparation time.

Research plan

Developing a successful research program is probably the hardest task for a new faculty member. We have several suggestions that may help new professors.

1. Immediately publish as much of your dissertation as possible. Since Ph.D. research requires new investigations, this is one area where the new professor may be the world's expert on a given topic. However, this position will not last long, so this work should be published in the first couple of years.
2. Seek out a research mentor. It is hard to start a research program from scratch. Working with a more senior faculty member, even if not in the professor's prime area of interest, is an excellent way to show funding agencies your capabilities. Do joint research proposals as soon as possible. Examples of such collaboration were discussed in the paper by Ochoa¹⁰. The professor needs to make sure that his university will recognize this type of research as well as the traditional individual research.
3. Set time limits on the professor's teaching preparation so that it does not interfere with his research.
4. Rigidly schedule time to write papers and funding proposals. These may be very hard

things to do in the professor's office, with all the interruptions that can come to him. He may need to take his notebook computer and go to a hideaway location to do this writing. For many faculty this may be their university library. Perhaps there is a vacant office in the professor's building that he can use. Some faculty can do productive work at home, but others find additional distractions there as well. The important thing is for the professor to find some place where he can isolate himself and concentrate on this crucially important writing task.

Service plan

At most universities, service is important only if you do not do any. Doing good service will not overcome inadequacies in other areas. We agree with Mellichamp¹¹ and recommend that untenured faculty members cheerfully perform their fair share of the service needs of their program, but not volunteer for additional work.

Once a professor has achieved tenure, he may wish to seek out service opportunities that reflect his personal interests and abilities. For example, both of the authors have served terms as President of our school's University Senate. We saw this as an opportunity to have an impact on our campus that is larger than just our individual faculty programs. This allowed us to get to know faculty and staff from around campus. We now have a much bigger picture of what is really going on in our entire university. The professor should still be selective in his choice of service opportunities. He should look around his campus and find some service opportunities that fit his own personal goals. Serve excellently in these capacities and turn down ALL other service opportunities. For even if a professor is now tenured, he will want to get a future promotion to full professor as well as pay raises. To accomplish those goals, the professor will still need to be productive in teaching and research.

Cautions about planning

Planning of itself will not necessarily help. It is important that the plan actually reflect the professor's values. It is also essential that the plan be consulted from time to time to make sure that the professor is doing what he planned to do.

We heartily agree with Steven Covey's approach³ which states that a professor's plan should be based upon his basic principles as to what is important in life. It should reflect where he plans to go, not just where he is. His emphasis on putting First Things First is very important to the engineering professor. Using some of his concepts to help an engineering professor achieve balance has been previously discussed by Samples¹². We need to schedule our life based on what is truly important, and not just based on what appears to be the immediate problem. This will require saying no to some opportunities in order to be able to fulfill the really important ones.

We have been influenced by Richard Swenson's book *Margin*⁴. In *Margin*, Swenson compares a book page to our life. No book publisher covers an entire page with text, for it would then be unreadable. There is always some margin left so that the page can be more easily read.

Similarly, in our life we should not schedule all of our time in formal commitments. We need to leave some unscheduled time, or margin, so that we will have the time to deal with unexpected opportunities or unanticipated problems. In his book *The Overload Syndrome*¹³, Swenson expands on his thesis in *Margin* to give a number of practical activities that can be used to create margin in your life. Since many (if not most) faculty members have significant experiences with an overloaded professional and personal life, we highly recommend this book to our fellow overloaded professors.

Some of Swenson's recommendations have been modified and included in our discussion of research and teaching. Some of his other suggestions to help create margin in our life are¹³:

- Prioritize activities and commitments so that the most important ones get accomplished.
- Practice saying no to good things. There are many good things that can be done, but which will keep us from doing things that are actually more important.
- Consider doing less, not more. This is related to the statement about prioritizing. The professor should determine to do the right things, not just every task that is presented to him by others.
- Protect open spaces. The professor should not schedule all of his time, leave some time periods (and entire days) completely open. One application of this principle is the first author deliberating taking a full day personal retreat every quarter to evaluate his professional and personal life. This involves going somewhere away from campus (the public library is a good location), and thinking through the different aspects of his life.
- Tame the telephone. Professors should consider unplugging or turning off the telephone so that they can get more work done. If this is not possible, get and use an answering machine. The first author has used this approach. When in his office and working on something important, he often does not answer his telephone, and lets the answering machine record the message. He then can respond when the time is convenient to him.

Using double dipping to improve performance

With the very tight time constraints that most faculty members are facing, one way a professor can increase his chances of obtaining significance is to double dip as much as possible. What we mean by this is to try to accomplish at least two different goals at the same time. Let us look at several examples of how this might be accomplished.

Like many engineering faculty members, the first author has a small consulting business. This business helps to provide additional summer support and keeps him tied to the real world of engineering. Most of his consulting has been in the area of failure analysis. He has used what he has learned to create a continuing education course in failure analysis that he has taught for several professional societies and two different universities. This has produced additional summer support. He then used this material to create a course at his university. He then published an ASEE paper on his experience¹. In this example, he used consulting as the springboard to create a new class (which pleases his supervisor) as well as get a conference

publication (which also pleases his supervisor). We would encourage engineering professors who consult to convert their consulting into something that will help them at their university. Starting a second business may be a way for a professor to supplement his income in a family friendly way. Parry and Bottomley¹⁴ describe the path they have taken to accomplish such a goal.

A second possibility to double dip is to combine education with traditional research². One obvious option is for a professor to create new courses in his research area. This will result in a new class for his students (which should please his supervisor). If this is a senior level technical elective, the class can be used as a tool to help recruit new students into his personal research program. If this class is innovative, perhaps the professor can do an education related paper based on the class.

Another possibility is to directly pursue educational research. Many governmental agencies (such as NSF and NASA) are funding research into engineering education. The authors have used the NASA NOVA program to create a course in engineering problem solving for future teachers^{15,16,17}. In addition to getting external funding, this has been a very enjoyable experience for the authors. In situations like these, professors can get paid to do many of the things they really want to do anyway, which is to have fun developing exciting new courses. In this case, the class is the research project. If the professor is successful, he can then turn this work into a publication. Before a professor jumps into the world of educational research, he needs to make sure his university will accept research of this type. Some universities do not recognize educational research as real research. Other universities may accept educational research, but still want you to do some traditional research. This is the case at our university. The college leadership still wants us to do traditional research, but we are allowed to use educational research as part of our overall plan.

It is also possible to sometimes combine personal and professional lives. This needs to be done very carefully so that the professional part does not overwhelm the personal part. One example we have both done is to take families on some professional trips, making sure that there is a lot of fun activities for them to do while we are in technical sessions. This should not replace family vacations, but can be used to supplement them. The first author has taken his children to many student professional society meetings and socials. His sons have enjoyed this, and the students seem to like having some children around. Another example is the writing of this paper. The first draft of this paper is being written while Dr. Jordan is attending a four day speech workshop with his teenage son. He is with his son in some sessions, as well as at meals and in the evenings. However, during some sessions that are aimed at the teenagers alone, he is in a nearby room writing this manuscript. In fact, more work is getting done here than if he had stayed home, for there are no campus type interruptions to his writing.

Setting rigid publication and proposal goals

Publications and research funding proposals do not get written without some extensive concentrated effort. We believe that it is absolutely essential to set up publication and proposal goals each year, before the year has started. The professor should spend some time reflecting on what he wants to accomplish in the next academic year. Once the professor has set some realistic goals, we recommend he put a copy of them in a place where he will see them frequently, so that he will be continually reminded of what he has committed to do. This does not mean that the professor cannot change them if some sudden opportunity develops, but that he should make changes only after thinking through the implications of these changes.

A professor's publications should include a mixture of refereed journal articles, conference papers, as well as technical reports. The specific mix of these that are needed will vary from university to university, as well as from professor to professor. Even if they do not count for very much at a professor's own school, we recommend that he does some conference papers every year. This will allow him to go out and meet fellow researchers in his area of interest. He may be able to develop some personal networks that can help in future work. Going to conferences will also allow him to keep more current about what is really happening in his field.

It is been our experience that getting journal articles published is more difficult than getting conference papers published, but not for the reasons usually cited. Journal articles generally need to be more rigorous than conference papers. However, we have found in our own experience that it is the lack of deadlines that makes journal writing so difficult. Most conferences have rigid deadlines that must be adhered to if you wish to make a presentation at that conference. Deadlines help us to focus our efforts. However, journals do not have such deadlines. If a professor does not get an article finished this month, he can always send it in next month. However, next month can frequently turn into next year, or next year, or the year after that. We strongly suggest that the professor set rigid internal deadlines to writing his journal articles. Write them as if they had to be in a by a certain date.

Sometimes journal articles or conference papers get rejected, not because they are poorly written, but they are written to the wrong audience. The professor should use the Web to seek out what are the appropriate targets for his work. The professor's area of work may not necessarily be the official discipline of his academic appointment. For example, the first author's academic program is mechanical engineering, but his research interest is in materials engineering. Therefore he has not published in any A.S.M.E. (American Society of Mechanical Engineers) journals, but has instead sought out journals more relevant to his research interests.

Conclusions

We recommend that faculty members seek out significance, not merely success. We have outlined a path whereby an assistant professor can pursue both professional and personal significance in a manner that will allow tenure to be obtained in most situations.

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