

## New Kids on the Block – Tips for the First Few Years

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### Abstract

This paper is a “Top Ten” summary of suggestions for successfully starting a new teaching position, written by a new engineering educator. The paper covers topics of concern for new faculty and suggestions for “making the grade” inside and outside the classroom. Major areas of discussion include: having a life outside the work environment, attitude (yours and theirs), volunteering, and classroom expectations.

Starting a new job can be a very stressful experience. Many faculty find themselves in places they have never been, expected to do things they have never done. This list is a compilation of suggestions from many faculty, both new and experienced, on how to start out successfully:

✓ **Have a personal life.**

Join a bowling league. Go on vacation. Get married. Start a family. To be effective in any profession it is important to take time away from it. The time away will have you feeling refreshed and give you more energy for your job. When the students are having trouble working on a difficult concept or problem, I encourage them to take some time away from the problem and do something they enjoy.<sup>1</sup> When they return to the problem they can look at it from a different perspective.

✓ **Get involved in the community.**

Join a church. Volunteer at the local animal shelter. Join a local club. Be a Big Brother or Big Sister. Many faculty have had to move to areas where they don't know anyone. Getting involved in the community gives you the chance to meet other people (not just those you work with) and to feel like you are a part of the community.

✓ **Learn new things.**

Take up cross-country skiing or scuba diving. Start woodworking, stained glass, cross-stitching or scrap-booking. Learn a new computer language. Learn a foreign language. Take a class in another department. As faculty members, one of the most important parts of our jobs is to encourage our students to be life-long learners; we should do the same.<sup>2</sup>

- ✓ **Lead by example.**  
Show up to class early. Be prepared. Be organized. Grade and return papers quickly. Keep your office hours. Answer your e-mail. Show everyone respect. Be fair. Treat everyone the same. Be clear about expectations. Listen to other's ideas and opinions. Volunteer (it is much better to volunteer for something you would like to do, than to be picked to do something you do not want to do). Keep a positive attitude; your attitude will likely dictate the attitude in the classroom.<sup>3</sup> Admit your failures. Act the way you want your students and co-workers to act.
- ✓ **Talk with your students.**  
Get to know students' names and what they are interested in. Students may be hesitant to talk in the classroom, if you can get them to speak on unrelated topics, they will be more likely to feel that they can ask questions during lecture. Some of the students might not have anyone else to talk to. If you sense that they need to talk, try and strike up a conversation with them (if required you can refer them to counseling services).
- ✓ **Don't rush through material.**  
When teaching a class, try not to rush through the material just to get through a certain amount by the end of the term. It is more important that the students understand the basic concepts very well, than to have a poor understanding of all of the concepts.<sup>4</sup>
- ✓ **Try new things.**  
In order to keep the students and you on your toes, try new things in the classroom.<sup>5</sup> Not everything you try will work, but the students realize that you care that they learn the material. By keeping current on the latest developments in teaching, you can get some ideas of things to try and then modify them as necessary. Adding some type of activity in every lecture seems to help their interest and involvement. Having students work on problems in groups is a good way for them to interact with each other.
- ✓ **Network with other faculty and staff.**  
Go to lunch with other faculty and staff. Attend the President's luncheons. Attend seminars. Get to know the computer administrator, secretaries and janitors. By meeting other faculty and staff, you may find an unofficial mentor, someone to collaborate with, or just make new friends. Other faculty may have taught the classes that you are teaching and may have helpful suggestions or techniques you can use. The staff keep the university running, make sure you treat them with respect.
- ✓ **Get involved in campus life.**  
Be an advisor for an organization. Attend the hockey, basketball, or football games. Go to the concerts or plays. Go to lunch with students. There is so much more to the university experience than what is in the classroom. Participating in campus life helps you to get to know your students in a different light.

✓ **Set realistic goals.**

You can not do everything, no one can. Set goals that stretch you, but that you can achieve. The first few years are hard enough with out you being hard on yourself. Try to write one paper a term, or perform one outreach activity each term. If money is tight, look for free seminars. When you feel comfortable with what you doing, add something new.

Everyone has different job requirements, but hopefully these suggestions can help during the first years. Most faculty do not get someone to take them in and show them they way. You may have to find seek someone out to help you, just don't be afraid to ask for help. Remember that you are not alone, you do not have to be an island on to yourself. Just like we say to the students "Seek help if you need it, ask questions anytime".

**Bibliography**

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