

Practical Advice for the “New Kid on the Block”

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Nobody told me how hard and lonely change is. – Joan Gilbertson

As a new faculty member at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, I have recently experienced many changes associated with starting a new career. I can readily attest to the unique challenges and expectations of assuming the position of assistant professor after serving twenty years in the fire service, and several more in the industrial sector. While the university has been wonderful in its encouragement and support, there is only so much that can be provided. During my acclimation to the university, I learned a few tricks along the way. I would like to share them with you to ease your transition into the world of academia.

Establish an open relationship with the chair of your department. This person was instrumental in hiring you. They have a vested interest in your success because your performance is a direct reflection upon them. It is in their best interest to help you succeed. It is always wise to seek their advice. When establishing a relationship, an informal approach may prove more beneficial. Invite them to have lunch, away from the hectic atmosphere that may be associated with their office. Any administrative problems that may arise should be addressed with the chair when they are minor; they never disappear on their own. Examples may include unclear university policies or tricky student advising questions. Many times, the department chair is the only person capable of handling a specific problem.

Be patient. Realize that your acclimation will take time. A job change is always stressful and many involve relocation which can be an overwhelming experience in itself. Combined, these stresses can take a toll on the strongest, most organized person. Questions of self-doubt begin to surface. Did I do the right thing? I had a good job before, what was I thinking? These thoughts are natural and will soon dissipate as you become absorbed in your new duties.

Do your homework. Learn as much as possible about your new environment. You have evidently completed your homework with regard to the interview; now finish the rest of the assignment. Upon an offer of the position, place a pre-arranged phone call to one of your interviewers. Prepare a list of questions in order to secure answers that may smooth your transition. You may wish to plan an early trip specifically for this purpose. Any information gathered prior to arrival will provide major personal benefit.

If you don't know – ask! There truly is no such thing as a dumb question. Established faculty members can remember what it is like to be the “new kid on the block”. Take the initiative; ask fellow faculty, staff, or even students when you are looking for specific place or information. The blank look is not totally reserved for college freshmen.

Get to work early and beat the rush at least a few days of the week. At the majority of institutions, convenient parking is at a premium. Unless your parking strategy is part of your exercise program, you'd better arrive early. The early morning is an excellent time to work undistracted by the normal activities of the day. This is when you are at your freshest and most creative peak of the day.

Be proactive. Get ahead and stay ahead of your classes. Remember the last-minute cramming as a student to complete an assignment? The anxiety does not lessen just because you are the teacher. Do not procrastinate! Stay ahead of the game. Ideally, you should be no less than two weeks' ahead at any given time during the semester. An effective class presentation is directly linked to adequate class preparation.

Find a mentor. Find someone that has "been there – done that". It is not an uncommon practice for an innovative department chair to assign a new faculty mentor. If a mentor is not provided, it wouldn't be improper to inquire whether one would be available. A caring mentor could prove invaluable in your adjustment to your new environment. Many seasoned faculty members would be glad to serve in this capacity if asked.

Get lost on purpose and learn the campus. Come out of the cave (your office). Most college campuses are beautiful and provide excellent walking opportunities. The exercise and fresh air will provide a welcome break and possibly provide further discoveries.

Volunteer for a committee. There is usually no shortage of them. Being the new kid, this detail has most likely been covered for you. If so, make the best of it. This is an excellent way to communicate your team skills and prove your loyalty to the institution. Arrive to the meetings on time and be well prepared to discuss the business at hand. Although time consuming, committees force people to get to know each other. It is usually no coincidence that new faculty receive immediate assignments. On the flipside, don't volunteer for too many committees. Your department chair and colleagues should be to suggest an appropriate workload that will align with your university's reappointment and tenure guidelines.

Perform periodic self-evaluations. How am I doing? What can I do better? The first step in the self improvement process is self-assessment. Take a moment and be honest with yourself. Are you setting goals? Are they being met? Most likely, some are and some are not. Put your plan on paper. Establish benchmarks and periodically check yourself. Adjust when necessary.

Invest in yourself. Education got you this far – it can take you even further. We constantly hear the old cliché "learning is a lifelong process". As educators, do we walk the walk or do we merely talk the talk? We should demonstrate by example that we are serious in this quest. Attend classes and seminars to keep up with the latest technology. As a result, new concepts will find a way into lesson plans.

The preceding list requires no special training or skills. It does, however, require patience, persistence, and active participation from you. Always remember that you were the one chosen to do the job. It is a combination of your knowledge, experience, and personality that

got you this far. They are the same qualities that will establish you as an integral member of your institution. The rest is up to you.

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