COMMENTARY

The Five Most Important Lessons I Learned Along the Path to Clinical Professor

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Data from the Academy indicate that non-tenure track (NTT) faculty are not ascending academic ranks to the same extent as tenured/tenure-track faculty. The reasons for this are likely multifactorial but may include a lack of direction, purpose, and resources. While there is more than one way to arrive at a particular destination in academia, it seems wise to listen and learn from those who have traveled the path. In this Commentary, which is directed to new and mid-career NTT faculty, I discuss the five most important lessons I learned along the path to becoming a clinical professor. This includes the importance of humility and serving others, setting goals (and advocating for the time you need to reach them), working smart (not simply hard), taking an active role in advancing the profession, and finally, taking time away from work and seeking alternative work arrangements that promote work-life balance.

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INTRODUCTION

You live in the northeastern United States and your family loves to camp. You have decided to drive cross-country to visit several national parks out West. Everyone is excited about getting away and visiting a part of the country they have not seen before. When preparing for your travels, do you choose plan A: pack the morning of the trip, get in your vehicle, take a vote on what park to visit first, turn on the GPS, and go? Or do you follow plan B: map out the national parks you wish to visit in advance (after conversing with someone who has taken this trip before), budget, make reservations for camp sites, establish a plan to travel from one destination to the next, and put the plan in motion, all while being flexible when you encounter detours along the way? While plan A may be more spontaneous, the chances of a successful outcome (however you define that) are lower than with plan B—not to mention you will save money on gas by taking the most direct route between parks. While choosing plan B in the scenario described is an easy decision, faculty sometimes approach their career in a manner more aligned with plan A. While plan A may provide a good deal of movement, sometimes direction, purpose, and resources are lacking.

The 2022-2023 Profile of Pharmacy Faculty indicated full professors comprise 39% of tenured/tenure-track (T/TT) full-time pharmacy faculty within the Academy.1 In contrast, the distribution of nontenure track (NTT) faculty and faculty at institutions without tenure lines heavily favor the junior and mid-career ranks: 41% assistant professors, 30% associate professors, and 14% professors.1 This suggests that NTT faculty are not ascending academic ranks to the same extent as T/TT faculty. One aspect of my professional mission is to help faculty, particularly NTT faculty such as myself, reach their career goals. While there is more than one way to arrive at a particular destination in academia, it seems wise to listen and learn from those who have traveled the path. This Commentary, which is directed to new and mid-career NTT faculty, discusses the five most important lessons I learned along the path to clinical professor.

DISCUSSION

Be Humble and Serve Others

This is one of the first lessons I learned and one I have carried with me throughout my career. I excelled in my studies during pharmacy school and was highly engaged in student government. As I completed my final semester of pharmacy school, I was humbled when I did not match with my first, second, or even third choice of residency; I matched with my fourth choice. I had desired to move South for my residency training, but God had
other plans. This ended up being the best thing for me, with the match being a perfect fit that would position me for a rewarding career in academia. Then, as a faculty member, I was the first in our department to be promoted to the clinical associate rank in a decade, and the first to be promoted to clinical professor in more than 20 years. I was on the fast-track to school leadership, but I was once again humbled when I was not the school’s first choice for department chair, despite 15 years of service and 7 years as vice-chair/interim chair. I was eventually promoted to department chair, but this trial gave me an important perspective that has compelled me to grow as a more well-rounded academician and made me a better mentor. These (and other) experiences taught me the importance of serving others, and that doing so requires deep humility. My recommendation is to invest in others and do what is best for them and for the team. One way to do this is to seek out opportunities to mentor. The mentor-mentee relationship is mutually beneficial. A mentor can help their mentee be more effective and productive and thereby reduce the chance of burnout. Furthermore, being a mentor is not only rewarding in itself, but also may help the mentor be more effective in their own pursuits.

Set Goals, Advocate for Time to Achieve them, and Be Ready for Detours

Faculty may be unclear about what is expected of them and what it takes to move their career to the next level. Having a clear understanding of the mission and strategic initiatives of the organization, as well as an understanding of promotion criteria, are vital in helping faculty set thoughtful goals. Engaging the supervisor ensures these goals are pertinent to their position and that they connect with the collective goals of the organization, while engaging the mentor can better position faculty for advancement and a rewarding career. This process can be facilitated by drafting the teaching, research, and service statements of the dossier early in one’s career, well before being considered for promotion. I have found this provides a good opportunity for self-reflection and can provide direction. Once goals are established, faculty (and their mentor) need to advocate for time to realize these goals. In the early 2000’s, our school struggled with NTT faculty advancement. We are now intentional about assigning and monitoring effort, give faculty a voice in their effort distribution (during annual performance reviews and when new assignments are made), and as a result have seen faculty (and our unit) thrive. If you are struggling to achieve your goals, do not be afraid to talk with your mentor and your supervisor; they are there to help and have a personal stake in your success.

As a new faculty member, your career will likely take unanticipated twists and turns. If I were asked on my first faculty interview in 2002 if I planned to be a department chair one day I would have said, “no.” After realizing leadership was where I could best use my talents and have the greatest impact, I took on the role of department vice-chair in 2012. Then, in 2017, I was asked to take on the role of interim department chair. Fortunately, at the direction of a mentor, I immersed myself in a continuous leadership development program early on in my career and was given opportunities to apply these principles to my service duties as a junior and mid-career faculty member. Had I not prepared for the unexpected, I would have struggled to lead when called upon. As I transitioned into this role, what was expected of me changed. Struggling to balance all facets of my previous faculty life with the roles and responsibilities of a department chair, I collaborated with my dean to redistribute my effort, something that afforded me the time I needed to effectively lead our department. I strongly recommend both new and mid-career faculty identify a mentor, engage in continuous professional development, seek out opportunities that push you outside your comfort zone, and ask for help when needed.

Work Smart, Not Simply Hard

Although expectations vary across organizations, NTT faculty are typically expected to engage in all four academic pillars (teaching, research/scholarship, clinical practice, and service). To balance these pillars and promote success, faculty must master the art of working smart, not simply hard. This starts with being strategic with how you invest your time and energy. For example, when I was a junior faculty member, I was tasked with preparing an evidence-based presentation for my practice site’s Pharmacy and Therapeutics Committee. I was able to leverage this project into a published review article, two published survey-based research projects, and a published case series. Second, building collaborative relationships within and outside the school is key to enhancing productivity, particularly in research and scholarship. The most fruitful collaborations in my department are interdisciplinary, include faculty with shared interests, and are composed of both T/TT and NTT faculty. Third, faculty need to learn how to prioritize. The Eisenhower Matrix is a powerful tool that designates tasks based on importance and urgency and can help faculty to prioritize accordingly. Focusing on important tasks, regardless of urgency, optimizes impact, can help faculty move forward to their career goals, and can position organizations to realize their mission.
Engage in Professional Service

New faculty should join (and engage in) state and national professional organizations. Active engagement in professional service is vital for a variety of reasons. It benefits the faculty member by providing opportunities to develop skills vital to being an effective academician, to network and collaborate, to engage in professional leadership which can help faculty establish national prominence, to access research grants, and to meet criteria for Fellow status. Second, it benefits the faculty member’s organization by increasing visibility of the school. Third, it benefits the professional organization and the profession through realization of strategic initiatives and promotes advancement in practice, education, and research. Developing a professional service plan and identifying a “professional home” connected to the faculty member’s interests and aspirations early in their career can set faculty on the right path. This is an important activity because, in my experience, faculty that “wing it” go in one of two directions: no engagement or over-engagement. Between 2016 and 2019, I was serving as chair of the Eastern States Conference for Pharmacy Residents and Preceptors, as chair of the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) Pediatric Pharmacy SIG and was on the board of directors for our state affiliate of the American Society of Health-system Pharmacists. I was honored to have been invited to take on these roles and humbled to have been elected or appointed to all of them. Through these roles, I was able to refine my leadership skills, developed great relationships that have been both personally and professionally rewarding, and made a positive impact on the profession and the organizations I served. But, when you are overcommitted in any one area of academia, it impairs your ability to be successful in the other pillars and to respond to the unexpected, as happened to me when I was asked to assume the role of interim department chair in 2017. My advice is to actively engage in one or, at most, two professional organizations. Not only can this help you balance the duties of your faculty position, but focused engagement can also qualify you for recognition that can facilitate advancement, such as Fellow status. This may mean you have to say no (or at least not right now) to good opportunities (after talking with your mentor), and that is okay. Lastly, when you do commit, understand it is a fiduciary responsibility, so follow through! When you do the work, you will build relationships and credibility, which are vital to your future career pursuits.

Make Time for Yourself

If you stick around academia long enough and advance to a certain point, you are going to struggle with work-life balance. Anyone who says they have it all figured out is kidding themselves. I have spoken on the topic multiple times, so some may think I am an expert on the matter. But, if you asked my wife if I have perfect work-life balance, she would laugh. Why? Because she knows it is a constant struggle for me. Work-life balance looks different for everyone and can fluctuate over the course of one’s career. Yet, when I advise faculty to use their paid time off (PTO), I often hear, “I cannot take time off right now. I just have too much to do.” Here is the hard truth: there is never an ideal time to take vacation, and you will never be less busy than you are now, at least not until you retire. Taking time away from work recharges your battery and is beneficial long-term. I have always used my PTO and was still able to attain the rank of clinical professor, so why shouldn’t you? Now, as a department chair, I am busy to an extreme that only department chairs can appreciate. But it is important for me to model good work-life balance for my faculty, staff, and mentees, so I take time off (partial personal days and weeklong vacations). Our organization has also investigated and experimented with alternative work arrangements, such as remote work, which we know has perceived benefits to work-life balance without compromising productivity and effectiveness and affords me the opportunity to do things like draft this article while sitting on the deck of my home on a sunny summer day.

CONCLUSION

New and mid-career faculty can learn from those who have taken the trip upon which they are embarking. I am at the halfway point of my career, so I still have a great deal to learn. This advice is intended to complement the mentoring you receive at your school to help you get to where it is you want to go. In this Commentary, I stress the importance of humility and serving others, setting goals (and advocating for the time you need to reach them), working smart (not simply hard), taking an active role in advancing the profession, and finally, taking time away from work and seeking alternative work arrangements that promote work-life balance. Like embarking on a road trip, a career in academia is more about the journey than the destination. As a pharmacy academician, the titles and accolades come because of the students and colleagues you impact, the patients you care for, and the new knowledge you create through your research endeavors.

REFERENCES