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Navigating Academia: What You Didn't Learn in Graduate School

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Paper based on a program presented at the 2009 Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) Conference, October 15-18, San Diego, CA.

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There are many issues that face new faculty members that are not addressed in doctoral coursework. The first years as a faculty member can be especially trying and stressful (Boice, 1992) with new faculty members facing loneliness, confusion, and worries about their scholarly productivity (Austin & Rice, 1998; Boice, 1992). Several authors have examined different aspects of counselor education faculty member experiences in the early stages of their career, including stressors and research expectations (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008; Davis, Heller Levitt, McGlothlin, & Hill, 2006; Magnuson, 2002; Magnuson, Norem, & Haberstroh, 2001; Magnuson, Norem, & Lonneman-Doroff, 2009). In her examination of counselor educators' satisfaction, Hill (2009) found that pretenured faculty members experienced more role overload, isolation, interpersonal strain, and stress-related physical symptom than did their tenured counterparts.

One way to improve the profession of Counselor Education is to better prepare those faculty members just entering the field so they can work towards success in the future. Boice (1992) also found that the first years of an academic career are predictive of future success. Therefore, knowing how to navigate these common issues during the first years as a faculty member is particularly important. This is also the reason why the

purpose of this paper is to offer useful information to people entering the professorate about some of the stressors they may encounter. Specifically, the authors will address: finding a position with a good fit; respecting tradition; it's o.k. to say "no" sometimes; balancing teaching, scholarship, and service. Additionally, the authors will discuss challenges facing women, diversity issues, working in union vs. non-union universities, and working with graduate assistants and advisees. Navigational tools for use during this process will be offered as well as some recommendations for how senior faculty might support new faculty during this time. The authors recognize that assisting new faculty in achieving success is one way to ensure a profession's leadership and growth for years into the future. The information in this paper was originally presented at the 2009 Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) conference in San Diego.

Tips for Navigating Academia

Find a Position With a Good Fit

Perhaps one of the most important things to consider before accepting an academic position is whether or not there is what we call "a good fit." Several factors can contribute to whether or not one feels as though a position fits with their hopes and expectations. Ask yourself if you prefer to be at a master's only program or if you would like to apply to programs with a doctoral program as well. What type of university do you want to work at- a research intensive university or a teaching intensive university? How is the department viewed within the college? How is the college viewed within the university? Does the mission of the university fit with your goals?

Finding a good fit goes beyond choosing the type of program and university in which you are interested. It is also important that you can see yourself working with your potential colleagues. Assessing how well a position fits begins with the interview process. One needs to ask several questions: Do the faculty members seem collegial? Do they work well as a team? Could you see yourself working with this group of people? When was the last time someone new was hired? How do they plan on supporting a new faculty member? Are there any tensions apparent? Are there people who may serve as mentors to you? There is no clear cut way of knowing you will be happy in a certain program, but we believe it is very important to follow your gut feeling and instincts when assessing how you relate with potential colleagues.

It is also helpful to remember the other half of a position being "a good fit." As you are analyzing and deciding how the position fits your needs, the faculty offering that position are also looking to see if what you have to offer will meet the needs of that position. It is important to take the time to research what those needs might be -- starting before you even submit your application. The search process is time intensive and expensive on the end of the faculty offering the position. If the skills and strengths you have to offer are not a match for what the position is advertising as its needs, then applying may end in frustration for everyone. If you do have qualifications that match the needs of the position, the authors suggest making that clear during the interview process to show the faculty how you fit on their end.

It may happen that you accept a position and decide that it is not a fit for you after all. This may be due to issues related to the position or it may be for reasons beyond the job itself. For example, family and partner issues or geographical issues may influence

whether or not you feel you can continue on in a position. Some may be stressed because they assumed they would stay at their current position until they achieved tenure or even retirement. Rest assured you are not the only person who has made changes in job positions after a short amount of time.

Respect for Tradition

Respecting the history and traditions of your new counseling program is an important part of acclimating to the new faculty position. Some people assume that just because their new program is different than where they were trained, the new program is less than adequate. Each program has its own way of doing things and different doesn't necessarily equal wrong. One mistake a new faculty member can make when starting a new position is to say, "In my old program, we did it this way" too frequently and then suggest too many changes too soon. We believe it is a good idea to observe and respect how things operate in the new program; understand the context before making suggestions for changes. Most faculty members will be excited to welcome a new colleague and the energy they bring, but making too many suggestions right away may be off-putting -- especially to those who built the program.

It's OK to Say "No" Sometimes

One of the most important lessons to learn is the value of saying, "No" sometimes. There will likely be several opportunities presented to you in your first years as a faculty member and some feel as though they must agree to do them all. Saying "no" is especially critical with service commitments. Commitments that are agreed to during the first year of employment may continue for several years in the future. Ramsey, Cavallaro, Kiselica, and Zila (2002) suggested that most counselor educators perceived traditional scholarly activities as having more weight in tenure and promotion decisions than other activities. They reported that while most found engaging in service activities meaningful, research was considered very important. It may be difficult to choose research over other activities, but research is what many universities value. It has been helpful for the authors to ask themselves, "Will this activity or commitment assist me in achieving tenure?" before saying, "yes" and making a commitment. Sharing the thoughtful reflection with others can provide a rationale for why you may be declining the offer.

We also offer a tongue in cheek word of caution: beware of senior faculty members with "offers you can't refuse." We are aware of brand new faculty members being asked to complete the program's Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs (CACREP) self-study document under the guise of it being a good way to become acquainted with the new program. Completion of this task is a huge undertaking even for a more experienced faculty member. We are also aware of new faculty members being asked to teach overload classes so they can be more acquainted with the students and earn extra money. While this may be a tempting offer, especially for someone who just graduated from doctoral school, we believe this time may be better invested in doing a good job in your standard workload. It may be important to not set the precedent that you are the person willing to take on extra responsibilities. Getting settled and familiar with the program before taking on extra duties may help you in the long run.

Balancing Teaching, Scholarship, and Service

Davis et al. (2006) reported that counselor educators in all academic ranks perceived that they devoted the majority of their time to teaching activities and that the average expectation for scholarship is about one publication per year. It is very important to ascertain what percentages of teaching, research, and service are expected of assistant professors at the university where you are employed. Maintaining a balance in these areas that meets the needs of the university will be important in the journey towards tenure and promotion.

Knowing what counts toward teaching, research, and service will be important for being successful in meeting the expectations for tenure and promotion. For the area of research, typically peer-reviewed articles are highly prized. One should know what, if any, value is placed on grants, books, book chapters, refereed presentations, and non-refereed publications. For the area of teaching, one should know how many classes they are required to teach each semester, the weight that teaching evaluations are given, the advising requirement, and, the process for teaching observations/evaluations. For the area of service one should know the expectations at different levels: department, college, university, the community, and the profession. Some programs value types of service differently. Before agreeing to committee assignments, ascertain the time commitment involved and the prestige of the assignment. Sometimes service commitments that are perceived as higher profile may be given more weight.

Challenges Facing Women

Studies have been conducted about the differences that women face in academia (Austin & Rice, 1998; Bronstein & Farnsworth, 1998; Lease, 1999; Perna, 2001; Trautvetter, 1999) and these researchers found that the female and male experiences differ and that female faculty members often experience higher amounts of stress than their male counterparts. Despite more women graduating with doctorates in counselor education and supervision (Chandler, Altekruze, & McCortney, 2002; Magnuson, et al., 2001; Maples & Macari, 1998) some female counselor educators experience negative consequences associated with being a woman in academia (Nelson, McGlothlin, & Bubenzer, 2008). If you are a woman, you are encouraged to investigate the climate for women at your potential university. Are women faculty members hired at an acceptable rate? Do women earn tenure at a rate comparable to their male counterparts? Are there family friendly policies, for example how is maternity leave handled? Are there opportunities for spousal hires? Getting answers to questions like these will help you assess whether or not the campus is woman-friendly.

In the field of counselor education specifically, female faculty found the most satisfaction from their supportive relationships with students and the most discouragement from negative relationships with other faculty members (Hill, Leinbaugh, Bradley, & Hazler, 2005). While we are not suggesting that this will be the same for all female counselor educators, we believe that being informed about what other women appreciate in a position can help the reader ponder what will be important for them in a position. We believe that if female counselor educators are educated about these issues, they can prepare themselves and advocate for themselves when necessary. Knowing that they are not alone in feeling this way can help minimize feelings of discouragement and isolation.

Diversity Issues

There is not a great deal of literature on minority faculty members in counselor education (Dinsmore & England, 1996; Hill, 2009; Holcomb-McCoy & Bradley, 2003), but authors have concluded that ethnic minorities are underrepresented as counselor education faculty members. Johnson, Bradley, Knight, and Bradshaw (2007) found that African American students were adequately represented in counselor education doctoral programs, but most were not entering counselor education faculty positions. Holcomb-McCoy and Bradley found that many counselor education programs were not using targeted strategies to recruit ethnic minorities as faculty members and that there are many CACREP accredited programs that have no ethnic minority faculty members. You should be prepared that if you are entering the professorate and are from an underrepresented group, there is a chance that you will be the only person from a diverse background on the faculty. Not surprisingly, faculty-of-color experience academia differently than their White faculty counterparts (Aguirre, 2000). It is assumed that this holds true for counselor education as well. In her study on counselor educator career satisfaction, Hill (2009) found that minority status did not affect occupational satisfaction. She did however state that there were relatively few minority respondents and this may have affected the results. Holcomb-McCoy and Bradley (2005) found that for African American counselor educators, most were generally satisfied with their jobs, but this satisfaction was related to the survey respondent's perception of the department's racial climate. Assessing the racial climate in the department and the university's commitment to diversity issues will be important when choosing a counselor education position.

Union vs. Non-Union Universities

There are quite a few differences in working at a university with a union and one without a union. In our limited experience, we have found that working with a union gives the faculty member more clarity of expectations, but there are more policies and rules that are expected to be followed. Historically, unions were created by faculty members to protect against censorship and intimidation and to protect the rights and roles of academics (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2006). According to the AAUP, the benefits of a union: (a) include safeguards for teaching and working conditions, (b) allow for the possibility of claims against administration, (c) provide members with a critical analysis of the institution, including budgets, enrollment trends, and policies, (d) increase political impact of the academic community, and (e) reinforce collegiality and prevent fractionalization of faculty members. Opinions about, and the power associated with, a union varies from campus to campus. While we do not claim a preference for one or the other, we believe it is something important to consider when choosing a position.

Working With Graduate Assistants

One of the issues we did not feel prepared for when entering the professorate was working with a graduate assistant. There were questions about how to best utilize their services while offering them a chance to professionally develop through their work as a graduate assistant. Programs may have guidelines about the work a graduate student is allowed to perform depending on if the graduate assistant is a master's level or doctoral

level student in the program. Programs may also have specific policies about how faculty members are to document the time and work of their graduate assistants. In addition, it was difficult to learn the balance between providing guidance and allowing the graduate assistants the space to do their jobs. Ultimately it has been useful to have assistance with literature searches, organization of documentation for the tenure and promotion process, as well as data coding and analysis. It has been helpful with doctoral graduate assistants to have support with classes through co-teaching and co-presenting at professional conferences. It has been useful to know and to inform the graduate student that their work is typically reviewed for accuracy by their supervisor, thus allowing for less micro-management while they are completing tasks. Engaging in this review process also allows for the faculty member to feel more comfortable delegating tasks to the student, particularly until they are familiar with the student's abilities and strengths.

The Advisor Role

We believe there are two broad categories in the role of advisor that have their own stressors: academic advising and dissertation advising. Some new professors are protected from advising duties during their first year and some are expected to dive right in from the beginning. It can be helpful to clarify these responsibilities during the interview process, including whether you will have advising responsibilities for undergraduate and/or doctoral students as well as master's level students. Academic advising requires that you are very familiar with the curriculum and requirements of the counseling program. While many of these questions and issues are clarified by familiarizing yourself with the program website and handbook, some of the questions advisees ask are not clearly identified in this documentation. The authors have found some senior colleagues very helpful in navigating this process. Having colleagues whom you can ask curriculum related questions to is very helpful and our experience has been that senior colleagues are generally willing to assist with these questions.

There is a lack of clarity when it comes to advising doctoral students: for the student as well as the professor. Universities differ in how doctoral advisors are viewed. Some have advisors who are responsible for the entire process whereas others will separate program committee advisors and dissertation chairs. Universities vary with rules about which faculty members are allowed to chair dissertation committees. Some allow newly hired faculty to advise doctoral research, others require a waiting period or service on doctoral committees prior to being the lead advisor of a doctoral student. Supervising student research requires a lot of time and expertise. One must be familiar with the research process, but also with the practices and rules of completing a dissertation at the graduate school and university. Sangganjanavanich and Magnuson (2009) addressed ways in which the doctoral advising process can be made less ambiguous and more transparent by using an adviser disclosure statement. This disclosure statement serves to orient the student to the dissertation process and helps doctoral students to become more informed consumers in their educational process.

Navigational Tools During This Process

We offer several suggestions for gaining support when navigating academia as a new faculty member. Maintaining connections with people you came to know during doctoral school is one way of expanding your support system in your new position. Your

peers from graduate school will likely be able to relate to what it is like to be the new person on the faculty and may be able to serve as a sounding board when you are frustrated at your new position. Conducting research, writing, and presenting with peers from your doctoral program can be very rewarding and productive. It is also important to keep in touch with mentors and advisors from your doctoral program. They may turn out to be a valuable source of information when you have questions and have yet to develop new mentoring relationships.

A great deal of support can be found in professional organizations. The American Counseling Association (ACA) and the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) are two such organizations. By providing educational materials and conference opportunities, counseling organizations can keep you connected to the field when you are feeling bogged down with your new responsibilities as an academician. There is an interest network that is a part of ACES that specifically addresses the needs of doctoral candidates and new faculty called the New Faculty Interest Network (N-FIN). Getting involved in local and state counseling associations is a great way to connect to new colleagues in the field.

Recommendations for Senior Faculty

There are ways that senior faculty members can help new professors navigate this process. Engaging in activities such as being social with new faculty members is desirable and will help lessen feelings of isolation (Trower & Gallagher, 2008). Approaching them to see if they have questions or concerns before they have to seek assistance from you is one way of seeming approachable to new faculty members. We also recommend encouraging and supporting the research and writing efforts of junior faculty, not over-burdening them with service, and allowing time for course preparation. Being a new faculty member today is a different process with new expectations than it was for many senior faculty members. Even something as simple as asking how you might be of assistance can open the door for conversations with junior faculty members. These conversations have the potential for being very enlightening for all the parties involved. Conducting trainings on navigating the tenure process is also helpful to untenured faculty.

Conclusion

In conclusion, entering academia is a time of “many firsts.” For example, attending one’s first faculty meeting, teaching the first class of the semester, and the first time having a voice in program decisions. Along with these new experiences may come a feeling of uncertainty and doubt because of the lack of previous experience to draw from. LaRocco and Bruns (2006) not surprisingly explained that beginning faculty experience stress during their first year of employment. To decrease the amount of stress experienced they recommended learning about the university context, specific program or department needs, research priorities, fiscal concerns, and instructional resources. These recommendations mirror the advice given in the current article. It is imperative that the challenges of new faculty are addressed so that the profession can continue to flourish.

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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm