



What to Expect When You Are Expecting a New Career

Ronald R. Hagelman*

Department of Geography, Texas State University, San Marcos, TX, 78666 USA

**Corresponding author: Phone: (512) 245-8847; Email: rh46@txstate.edu*

Upon receiving the news (18 years ago) of the impending arrival of my first child, my wife and I dutifully purchased every what-to-expect book on the market. I read most of most of the books we bought and found them woefully disappointing. Not because they did not offer good information, but because their advice was not tailored to my specific situation. I needed to know exactly what I should expect, not generally what other people had received. I was looking for a detailed navigation chart to direct me to successful parenthood and instead I received a simple map of parenting regions. My point is that I suspect that a group of early career academics may have a similar reaction to my advice regarding career development as I did toward the what-to-expect parenting literature. There are, however, a few things I have learned along the way that may be of some use. These are aimed primarily at young academics starting off in faculty positions.

My first piece of advice is to learn to parse mixed messages. From the moment you take your first academic position you will be prescribed a variety of contradictory goals. You will be told to focus on your research and publishing to the near exclusion of all else. You will be asked to teach 2-4 classes a semester and to do them well. You will be required to engage in service responsibilities at multiple scales (department, college, university, community, professional, etc.). You will be told to do all of these and still have a family (if you wish), be happy (if you can), take care of yourself (in your free time), and keep a smile on your face (as a sign of your appreciation for your new job). You will be

told to be an independent scholar, a unique intellectual wellspring, a free thinker stepping to the beat of your own drum AND become a fully-integrated and cooperative member of a larger professional community. The bottom line is that most of us cannot achieve all of these goals at the same time with the same intensity. This means that you must learn, and learn quickly, how to toggle between these competing goals throughout any day, week, or month. If you do not, or if you focus too much thought on the institutional insanity behind why we ask these things of one another, you will likely fail. The good news is that many people around you have navigated this web of competing goals and we are generally happy to help you along the way. You are in the thick of it, but you are not alone - a thought that leads to my next piece of advice.

Seek mentoring at every opportunity. Being a new academic is not a job, it is an apprenticeship. It can be a bit of a shock for some of us that, even after passing the "23rd Grade," we are still students. The good news is that you are surrounded by teachers who, for the most part, have your best interest in mind. Every chance you have, ask anyone who has more experience than you what they think about the challenges and opportunities you are facing. No advice has to be taken as an absolute dictate, but all advice should be welcomed. This is especially important when you hit a fork in your professional road such as looking for your next job, accepting a new campus appointment, considering a professional service position, finding the right journal for your next paper, interacting

with a difficult colleague, responding to tough classroom situations, seeking your first grant, or any other decision that crosses your path and gives you pause to consider your options. I often tell my graduate students that, despite the many websites and books on the subject, there is no how-to manual for completing their theses or dissertations. The instructions for their success lie within the published literature and must be divined through thought, not downloaded through the internet. The same is true for your career as an academic. You can pick up all the brochures and attend all the workshops you want (and you should), but none of that will be as valuable to you as triangulating your own plan by talking one-on-one with a handful of more experienced colleagues. I cannot stress enough how important this lesson has been to me in my own career. I would not be successful or tenured or moving forward without the generous contributions of time and advice that I have received from my more experienced colleagues. If, as a new faculty member, you go through a week in which you have not uttered the phrase “mentor me on X, please,” then you are probably messing up. This leads to my next piece of advice.

Never forget that geography in higher education is a small, small world. Most of us are separated by only a few degrees of professional connection. We tend to know, or at least know of, one another. This is especially true at a regional scale. For the most part, this is a good thing. You get to know your colleagues, you form longstanding friendships and collaborations, and you are empowered by the sense of community that most of us feel. However, the cost of getting to know everyone is that everyone knows you. My point being, you are always on display, your actions are always being observed, and your reputation is accreting layer-upon-layer with every faculty meeting, conference, and colloquium you attend. I, for one, do not want to work in a world in which we do not look to new faculty to usher in new ideas, new perspectives, and new approaches. However, it is incumbent upon you to pick your battles thoughtfully and recognize that what you say or do today may be of some importance down the road, even if you did not intend on that outcome. I have always been fascinated by the fact that The Golden Rule exists, in one form or another, within nearly all belief systems. It is one of the few universal ideas promulgated by nearly all prophets, sages, and philosophers. You will do yourself a great service over the course of your career by following it at all times, especially in your early years.

My last piece of advice to those of you expecting the arrival of a satisfying career is related to your CV. My simple advice here is to work on building one that would earn you tenure and promotion anywhere, not just at your first or current institution. It is very easy, and therefore tempting, to throw yourself into the culture and activities of your first host institution. At least until you are tenured, be wary of building a CV that is of great value to your department/college/university, but of limited value to the industry. Yes, the idiosyncratic necessities of your immediate environment must be tended to, but weigh in the balance your ability to compete with peers for any position at any time. To do anything less, is to squander the opportunities enabled by your hard work in graduate school. Attend conferences when you can, collaborate often, talk shop with your peers, and stay attuned to what is happening with our discipline. Use this outreach to normalize your CV across a national (even international) landscape. Assuming they hired you with a research component in mind, any institution that does not value this effort is probably not the one you want to stay at anyway. In which case, you better have a CV that enables mobility. And, yes, that is an example of the mixed messages you should learn to parse...with the help of mentors...while not angering the powers that be...and always staying nationally competitive...and being happy and healthy. Do all of that well and, not unlike a new baby, your new career will bring you the envy of family and friends, the occasional need to hose off in the yard, and a lifetime of unmitigated bliss.