

Some Suggestions on how to Survive and Thrive as an Academic in the Arts.

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I have been on faculty in the Arts in seven different institutions of higher education over three decades. My spouse and creative partner has likewise had multiple appointments at various institutions over the years. As such, I have developed some strong opinions about the opportunities and pitfalls that await faculty. The following are few suggestions that hopefully may enhance a young academic's experience negotiating their first tenure-line appointment.

Read the Faculty Handbook carefully. Consult it often.

The Faculty Handbook lays out what your rights and responsibilities are. Having a thorough understanding of this contractual framework for all faculty members may save you from making some big mistakes and possibly help you find opportunities that you would otherwise not be aware of. My experience is that few of your colleagues have a working knowledge of the Handbook so, though it is good to seek advice, they oftentimes don't know and don't know that they don't know.

If it isn't in writing it doesn't exist.

Oral promises are only as good as the paper they are written on. A good strategy after a discussion is a follow up email clarifying any agreements/understandings that have been made. Memories are like sieves so, even with best intentions, people forget or distort what was said.

Document everything

Develop a good filing system to organize where things are so you may reference them as needed. You should approach putting together your retention, tenure and promotion portfolio as an ongoing project so that it is not a massive panic endeavor two weeks before you need it.

Join the Union if there is one.

Remember that higher education is a business and you are just an easily replaceable temporary asset. Any talk of "family" is complete bullshit. Having worked in institutions in states that allow for collective bargaining and those with "right to work" laws preventing Unions, I can attest to the importance of the protections offered by a Union, especially if you are involved in a grievance. If you can't join a Union then you are an individual who is afforded few official pathways to resolve disputes.

Proof read your emails carefully. And then proof read it again. And then again.

Emails can be misread easily with unintentional damaging subtext added in. Be very careful to keep your missives unemotional in tone. Start with a friendly sentence and then get to the (unemotional) business. Best to keep it short. Bullet points are helpful. Administrators get hundreds of emails per week, if not per day. DO NOT REPLY ALL unless it is a message meant specifically for ALL. Texts and social media are more casual and should not be utilized for business.

Always be as dispassionate as possible when you find it impossible to not disagree with fellow faculty members.

A former colleague/mentor of ours who was brilliant in department meetings challenging the idiocy put forward by senior faculty members confided that part of her secret for being able to not lose her cool was taking half a Xanax before Department meetings....

Take advantage of Faculty Development funds.

There is money available to support your various creative endeavors but you have to apply for it. There are oftentimes grants at the Department, College and University level. Many of your colleagues are either unaware or not motivated enough to apply for them. Oftentimes they are doled out on a first come, first served basis. Don't be shy. Faculty Development funds helped us to engage in international conferences and artist residencies as well as provide support for various productions we created. As a new hire you may experience a bit of a "honeymoon" period when it is easier to get supported by the institution. Take advantage of it.

Apply for outside funding.

Boiled down to its simplest level, the university is a business and its employees are considered assets. The more money a faculty member can bring into the university the more that faculty member is valued. This is why the football coach is so highly paid. In the Arts the grants tend to be rather miniscule but anything can help. One caveat: if a faculty member is successful at winning grants to support their own projects there is a potential for departmental jealousy, if there is an opportunity to write for support that benefits the entire department that is extremely helpful.

Relax and Enjoy the Conferences

We were able to find a few conferences where almost all of the sessions were interesting but those are rare. A good conference might have a third of the presentations that are actually interesting and informative - strive to make your presentation one of those - then select the ones that you think are worth your time, and be willing to blow off a session or two, especially if you meet some colleagues from other institutions who you enjoy.

Know the Time Suck that is Writing for Journals

The easiest way to get an article published is to write something that aligns neatly with the Journal editors' biases and cites the same authors in the endnotes as all the other articles do. You may be assigned an editor who will not give final approval until you accept all of their edits. Then the question you have to answer is "how much time/frustration is my control/integrity over this article worth?", especially when the reality is that very few people will actually bother to read your article after publication. As should be obvious, I am rather cynical about the whole professional conference/publication thing. It is based upon professionals donating their services (or in the case of conferences, paying to attend to donate their

services) rather than paying you for your creative work. But we all need to build our CVs for tenure and promotion so we keep supporting it.

Be mindful of protocol

The state university is a government bureaucracy. There were more than a few occasions when I had my hand slapped by "not going through proper channels."

Do not attempt to make major changes, even if you were told that was why you were hired.

I know of more than one faculty member who shocked the rest of the department by doing exactly what they were told was desired of them and bringing in some rather big changes. And they were punished for that transgression. Don't be fooled. Your colleagues are very comfortable with the way things are and resent being forced to change. If you must be involved in change make sure that there are several people (the Dean, the Chair, senior faculty, et al) who are completely supportive of that change. If at all possible, avoid appointments to Administrative positions such as director of a program until you have attained tenure.

Support your colleagues' egos

Go to their shows. Make sure to compliment them. Do whatever you can to be seen as a team player. Henry Kissinger was reputed to have said, "The politics in academia are so vicious precisely because there is so little at stake". Accept advice and offers of mentorship from senior faculty, even if you don't need it.

Try not to show up the rest of the faculty

Depending upon who your fellow faculty members are this may be a tricky one as you must demonstrate your creative expertise by doing great work but some may have such weak egos that your successes will be perceived as making them look bad. The whole structure of tenure and promotion requires you to "toot your own horn" so it is a delicate balance to say the least.

Stay in your designated lane.

This was especially difficult for us as interdisciplinary artists with expertise in more than a few areas. There are more than a few faculty who feel they "own" a specific subset of the discipline. Be careful not to inadvertently cross over into their perceived area of ownership. In some ways art making in the university is like producing in a union house - you can't do what others are assigned to do even though you could do it better and more efficiently.

Say Yes to Everything While Taking Measures to Protect Yourself from being taken advantage of.

As an Assistant Professor you will receive lots of Service opportunities and chances to do some necessary but rather onerous work that the Senior faculty don't want to do. I really don't know how to maneuver this one. You have to be seen as a team player so you can't be seen as turning down the work. But there are more than a few

senior faculty who perceive the whole tenure process like a hazing - "I had to do it so they should too!" - you have to find the delicate balance of being willing to take on extra work without allowing yourself to be abused.

Remember that all relationships made at the job are inherently professional, not social.

I made it a policy to not "friend" any of my students on Facebook until they were no longer my student. It is good to be friendly with them but you can't be friends in the true sense as there is an inherent status difference dividing you. The relationship with students is a tricky one as their job is basically selfish, to get the most out of their education they can, while your job as a teacher is basically selfless, to provide the most out of the students education. Some of your students will lash out when they feel inadequate to the challenges you have provided them. Some can be quite vicious. Keeping that in mind make sure that all of your interactions with them are defensible as pedagogically sound.

Department Christmas Parties, Receptions, etc are professional settings

Don't let your hair down and let alcohol loosen your tongue. It is possible to develop real friendships with your professional colleagues but those social relationships are always trumped at the job by the professional relationship. I had the unfortunate habit of befriending colleagues who were rather disgruntled within the department which served to put a target on me through proxy. Better to befriend colleagues across campus who don't have direct, ongoing business with you at the department level. That said, I truly treasure the friendships I made with my disgruntled department mates.

Strive to remain neutral. Don't align yourself within a 'bloc'.

There will be colleagues who will attempt to win you to their side. Listen but don't take up their cause, even if you decide to vote with them in the Department meeting. Be very cautious and aware of hallway politicking and gossip. Do not join in. Never, ever, rally students to your side against another faculty member.

Remember that you are at the bottom of a well-established hierarchy.

Unless you are a star hire whose presence on the faculty roster provides national/international acclaim, all of your professional accomplishments prior to being hired are meaningless. You are starting at zero and now have to prove your worth on a rather continuous fashion. In fact, if you have major professional accomplishments prior to being hired that may work against you as it may threaten the fragile egos of senior faculty without similar professional careers. Be very wary of senior faculty in positions of power who have limited talent and experience outside of the institution as they rose through the ranks by playing the game and know how to use it to their advantage. Anytime you have a conflict with a senior faculty member you have already lost. You have no rank while your colleague has both rank and tenure. The Department is stuck with them so they will perhaps regretfully, always support them.

Never Denigrate a Colleague, even if they are beneath contempt.

Students may come to you to share their concerns/complaints about fellow faculty members. If you take it upon yourself to champion the student's champion cause you will do no good for their cause and will cause harm to your own career. Listen. Validate their concerns. Inform them that there is nothing you personally may do to intervene and the student must take the initiative to deal with the matter. The most you may do is to help steer the student towards people who have power to actually do something. The usual protocol is the student must address their concerns to the faculty member directly, then take it to the Chair and then to a University or College wide administrator whose purview includes specific types of complaints. This should be outlined in the Student Handbook so it might be a good idea to bone up on that too.

You weren't hired just to teach.

You will be expected to serve through Teaching, Service and Creative Research. How that is divvied out is dependent upon your institution. Small liberal arts colleges and community colleges are the only institutions that truly prioritize teaching. In many (most?) institutions of higher education teaching is really the least considered during evaluations of your merit.

Plan for the future.

Take advantage of your full-time employment with a steady salary to invest in Roth IRAs to the full amount annually. Set up an SRA (supplemental retirement account) to deduct pre-tax money from your paycheck to invest for retirement. You will get old a lot sooner than you expect.

Remember your core values and hold on to your integrity.

This is the most important point. A mentor and dear friend at my first appointment bemoaned what she called "RTP (retention, tenure and promotion) Clones", young faculty who came in as bright spirits only to become deadened by their dedicated hoop jumping in pursuit of career success. For those people there is no Faustian bargain to sell their souls as they have given it away in tiny chunks over the years till there is nothing left to entice a Devil's bargain. By all means "go along to get along" whenever possible but not so much that you won't even be able to recognize the person in the mirror in seven years.