

Pathways to Academic Careers for School Psychologists

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It has been well documented that a shortage of school psychologists interested in working in academic settings exists (Little & Akin Little, 2004; Stark, Perfect, Simpson, Schnoonbelen & Glenn, 2004). The purpose of this article is to (1) discuss important strategies to assist school psychology graduate students interested in academic careers to obtain their goals; (2) elucidate ways to help school psychologists increase their skills to become a more competitive candidate for a professor position; (3) helping prospective working school psychologists make the transition from schools to a full-time career in academia and, (4) highlight early career issues such as teaching responsibilities, service, and finding your research focus as well as balancing these multiple tasks as a new faculty member.

The inspiration for writing this article spawned two early career faculty members having experienced many of the successes and challenges to both landing an academic job as well as balancing the demands of the early career professor. Additionally, the professors' ability to make this successful transition will hopefully provide readers, including graduate students, working school psychologists and early career faculty, with a more structured pathway to navigating their way through the labyrinth of the early career academic world.

Practical Advice for Graduate Students

First and foremost, forming strong relationships with both your peers and faculty members is pivotal. Although it may seem as though peer relationships are not as important as one initially thinks, some of these peers will eventually graduate and move on to academic careers. Thus, forming alliances with your peers can be important for future networking as well as collaboration on research projects

both in graduate school and beyond.

The importance of research experience.

Seeking out volunteer research opportunities as early as the first year, not only provides prospective faculty members with resume boosters and possible publication opportunities but helps to establish a reputation as a motivated student who is excited about research. Faculty members often appreciate this, especially early career faculty members who are in the most need of research help in getting their studies going and published. Once proven as a reliable and capable volunteer research assistant, the next logical step is to seek out a paid research assistantship where one can work directly under a faculty member. This provides a higher likelihood of becoming published as long as there is an important contribution to the article/study. However, it is important that graduate students (volunteer or paid) discuss the requirements of contributions for being an author versus a contributor on a prospective publication. Reviewing the American Psychological Association (2009) code of ethics for publications with a faculty member can help to clarify this.

The role of conference attendance and participation.

Attending local and national conferences such as The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and The American Psychological Association (APA) are also key ways to network. Presenting posters at these conferences either with other students and/or faculty members helps to provide a resume with experience in presentation of research. Related to this, always try to use projects for graduate school classes to develop to a possible poster or small-scale publications. For example, for

many professional conventions (e.g., NASP; APA) mentorship can be provided by faculty members to assist groups of students in presenting posters based on class projects. Students should be aware that the worst that could happen is that their submission is rejected, but there are ways to prevent this. Most importantly, the poster or paper must be well thought out and thoroughly researched. Further, asking a faculty member to review meaningful work will undoubtedly increase the likelihood of acceptance.

The importance of collaboration. With respect to research and presentations, collaboration is a key element (Proctor, Zibulsky & Comerchero, 2011). This is a learned experience from the 2011 NASP SPRCC conference where early career school psychology professors were provided with extensive collaborative research training. The take-home message was that collaboration with both students and faculty will result in a much higher success rate in publication.

Initiation of research. Many graduate students might be wondering how to initiate their own research. One way that has shown to be successful is to suggest the development of a topic focused research group. Presently, at Touro College, a PTSD research group has been developed with the help of the authors of this paper who are also the faculty advisors in the said college. The topics are limitless; thus, there is encouragement for all students with interests in specific topics pertaining to school psychology to try and become leaders of similar research groups. This enables students interested in a specific topic to share ideas and collaborate to produce projects that can lead to presentations and or publications.

Additional practical advice for graduate students is to:

- Write for student newsletters. If there is not one, be a leader and start one.
- Become their schools' Student Association of School Psychologists (SASP) representative.
- Volunteer to become a teaching assistant and make faculty aware that one is interested in becoming a teaching assistant.
- Of course this entails doing well in the class one wishes to be a TA!
- Make one's goals known to faculty. Attend office hours, secure a mentor/advisor preferably two (One an early career professor and one that is more experienced).
- Get published! Even if the student is the 5th or 6th author on a publication this still counts. Consider all publication outlets from small newsletters/grad psychology newsletters to high impact APA journals
- Again collaboration is key. Both with faculty and students).

Advice for Graduates

The first goal a new graduate should have is to publish a dissertation as soon as possible. Make sure that the dissertation committee is aware of the deadlines and keep revising and submitting the revisions as soon as possible. It is also important to stay in touch with the faculty advisors and colleagues from one's graduating university. The university can provide important connections to future research and job opportunities in academia as well as in other settings. The university's faculty will most likely provide the first letters of recommendation when applying for academic jobs. One way to do this is by keeping them posted on recent research and inviting them to collaborate on current publication endeavors.

Second, seek work as an adjunct professor. While this may not provide you with more research/publication opportunities, unless one has significant graduate school publication record, it will likely take a couple of years to land a full-time job as an Assistant

Professor. Adjunct teaching is an excellent way to spend time building a CV. Try to teach courses that are the most marketable and have a dearth of faculty available to teach such as statistics and/or research methods. Successfully teaching these courses can make a candidate attractive to many universities as they may value someone with expertise in this field, so do not sell your statistics books just yet!

One often learns the most from teaching classes that are outside of their comfort zone and emerge with more confidence for teaching material that they are less familiar with. Once an adjunct instructor teaches these courses the first time, personal insecurities tend to diminish. The second and third time an adjunct teacher presents a material, the students will consider him/her an expert. One does not need to be a genius in statistics - just well prepared. Here is where help from graduate school professors is also useful. The statistics professor might be willing to share some of his/her materials with a fellow colleague, such as a new adjunct teacher. This will help decrease prep time and leave more time to learn and rehearse the material that will be taught.

Networking is also a key component for landing a first job in academia. It is recommended to stay in touch with peers from one's home school. Attend professional conferences whether one is presenting or not. Often these conferences have special panels and sessions designed for early career professionals and recent graduates. Remain active in organizations such as NASP as well as the local state chapter (e.g., CASP, NYASP). Some of these local chapters will arrange socials hours at professional conferences. Try to attend these and be friendly, introducing yourself to as many colleagues as possible. Attending smaller local conferences within one's home state can provide a more intimate experience and will enable one to work with

professionals in the local region. Subscribing to early career listservs through NASP is another way to stay abreast of possible job opportunities and research collaborative projects. If the graduate attends NASP, sign up for a mentor, preferably one who is a faculty member so that they can provide guidance in the right direction and provide another networking opportunity.

Navigating the Job Search Process

First, begin the job search early. Faculty positions are normally posted for the next academic year and may start as early as October of the previous year. Secure letters of recommendation, preferably even before graduating from one's program since most search committees will ask for these as part of the application process. The student should also prepare a list of possible references (at least 5) in order to maximize the possibility of having the required three letters. Next, prepare a statement of one's teaching philosophy. Many search committees also require this as part of the application. The teaching philosophy should highlight previous experiences and should emphasize the type of classroom activities used to facilitate learning among diverse student learners. Finally, most importantly, prepare an academic Curriculum Vitae (CV). Try to model the CV after trusted faculty members' and have at least one faculty member look over it and help you revise it since it has a very different format than that of a regular resume. In addition to educational and work experience, the CV should include:

- Publications
- Presentations at conferences
- Other ongoing research projects the student is involved with
- Previous teaching experiences including the names of the courses taught
- Other graduate school extracurricular involvements, such as editing the school newsletter

The Search Committee Process

In general, a faculty search committee usually includes a chair (senior faculty member or dean). The remainder of the search committee can include a range of 3-15 people. It is good to ask how many individuals will be on the search committee. Search committees may also include current graduate students. When the application is submitted be sure to include all the required elements or there will be a risk that the application will not be considered. Generally, after materials have been received, an acknowledgement letter or email will be sent; these will state that a review of application will take place and that the student will be contacted for an interview if his/her credentials meet their requirements. If the student does not receive a letter/email then he/she should follow up with a phone call or email. It is important to not take rejection personally if one is not chosen for an interview as most search committees receive many more applications than there are openings.

Once the CV is received, it will be screened first by the dean/chair and maybe a couple of other faculty members to see if the applicant meets the criteria for an interview. An applicant being invited for an interview is great news as many applicants are not granted one. Most likely if the applicant is granted an interview he/she is under serious consideration for the position. If the applicant is not selected for an interview one will receive a "kind" letter of rejection. If possible, one can inquire politely via email and or phone as to why they were not selected for an interview. The student can explain that this will be used to help aide in future job search/professional development. Finding out this information out also helps one to identify areas in need of improvement (more often than not it is lack of significant research experience and/or publications).

The Interview Process

Interviews vary across different colleges/universities. Generally, the first round will be in a panel format with the entire search committee. The dean or chairperson may or may not be at the first interview but, in the end, approves or denies the search committee's recommendation to hire the student or not. Some colleges may also have more than one round of interviews wherein the second round, the student may be asked to give a "demo lesson." The following are some tips for maximizing the student's chances of being hired:

- Do your homework, any and all.
- Know the faculty, especially their research interests.
- If possible read a couple of faculty members publications prior to attending the interview.
- Know the mission of the college as well as of the department and the program.
- Come prepared with a list of questions: Remember the interview is both ways. Be yourself, but at the same time be formal and professional; dress for success!
- Try to let the committee members talk about the program and their interests and be sure to build your questions off of what they discuss.
- Always follow up with a thank you email both to the search committee chair as well as to individual faculty members.
- When emailing individual faculty members try to highlight something that they discussed such as a research article, course taught, etc.

Setting Up a Research Program

Many students and first year faculty members, like the authors of this paper, wonder, *What exactly is a research program?* This question confuses many early career professors. Quite often, junior level faculty have many great research ideas that are completely unrelated. Most early career faculty are under the false

impression that diversification is key; however, this is a misconception that can lead professors to become distracted by the allure of getting involved in projects that are interesting but unrelated.

In contrast, a research program should consist of a specific area in which the student is interested in and initially should be a broad topic. Ideally, the research program should build off of the student's dissertation as well as other previous graduate school research projects. Ideally, once the major areas of focus have been formulated, one should narrow these down to address a few specific research questions that can result in an empirically designed study that involves original data collection. Although theoretical research is beneficial, most journals, especially high impact journals, will only accept articles that demonstrate empirical research findings with original data collection. Most colleges and universities want to see that the student is engaged in various stages of empirical research, which weighs more heavily than theoretical and short pieces submitted to lower impact journals and newsletters. However, publishing in smaller newsletters is also recommended since it helps to establish oneself as a competent writer and could lead to networking opportunities across colleges.

The importance of seeking out collaborators for one's research is a key element of success. Take advantage of NASP early career professional groups and the newly created *New Trainers in School Psychology* Yahoo Group. (Harris & Sullivan, 2011) These resources are invaluable in helping to find other researchers in the areas of specification that might be interested in collaboration. Additionally, NASP has many special interest groups one can join with strong online communities, ranging from school psychologists for social justice to consultee-centered consultation. These interest groups are an excellent vehicle to connect school

psychologists to others around the world who share similar passions for particular subtopics. Consequently, the student may find they have a common research goal with someone who lives thousands of miles away! Again, collaboration is more likely to result in a publication as well as multiple publications. Completing a study yourself is not only lonely, but a lot more challenging as often breaking up the tasks of a research project (e.g., literature review, data collection, analysis, results write-up) will more likely than not help the student to be more efficient. It is also a lot less isolating and a great way to establish lifelong professional connections.

So what about the "side projects"? Side writing can be a great way to increase students' publications even if they are not empirical; however, they should not be one's primary focus. Online publications such as *NASP Communique* and *The School Psychologist* are two great outlets for writing shorter pieces such as columns, book reviews, theoretical articles and reporting smaller scale research studies.

Teaching Responsibilities

Depending on your university's requirements, the student will be asked to teach anywhere from 2 to 4 courses per semester. Colleges and universities with an emphasis on research will generally have a lighter teaching load in exchange for higher publication standards. "Publish or perish" is an unfortunate truth, especially in larger research universities, but in many smaller colleges as well. Alternatively, colleges that are "teaching universities" may have lower publication expectations. As any early career professor (again depending on the college), one should aim to publish about two articles per year with at least one being empirical. Finally, tenure track positions will often have very specific requirements as to the number and type of publications necessary to renew one's position and make one eligible for tenure.

Balancing your Three Responsibilities

In general, most colleges evaluate on three different areas: research, teaching, and service - with the highest emphasis for most tenure track positions being on research. Most colleges and universities want to see that the student is devoting the bulk of their time to research, which may seem counterintuitive given the student's main focus on working as a professor.

Service generally refers to activities such as: academic standards committee; professional development committee; admissions committee; faculty search committee; engaging in other special projects. While service is not as highly weighted as research and teaching, getting involved in service projects enhances one's recognition within the department and the dean/chairperson will generally be pleased with the commitment to take on extra responsibilities. With this in mind, it is also important to be able to say "no" when there is too much on one's plate. It is better to kindly turn down involvement in a project, than to take on something that one cannot devote adequate time to. Try to be realistic and elect to serve on the committees and special projects in which one has the most to offer.

With respect to teaching, one will be required to have office hours. Preparing coursework in advance is key. For new faculty this will be more time consuming since one may not have taught a class before; however, devoting a specific amount of time to the class preparation before the semester begins will free up your time for research and other important projects that are heavily weighted in the eyes of supervisors.

Integrating research into teaching is a great way to combine these two responsibilities. Use course projects as opportunities to collaborate with students on potential research projects/presentations. Additionally, designing research studies that

use data collected from class assignments can be another great way to get an empirical study established. In terms of grading assignments, try not to spend an overabundance of time in grading assignments. Giving good feedback is important, but being overly meticulous may significantly interfere with the amount of time devoted to the most important piece of the job: research.

Scheduling and Time Management

Different colleges and universities have different scheduling requirements. Whereas some require most professors to be on campus everyday, others require as little as twice per week. However, it is generally expected that full-time professors be devoted to work four if not five days a week, even if one is working from home. Establishing and sticking to a daily schedule in which a specific amount of time is devoted to research each day and a block of time is set aside for teaching and/or service activities is essential to success.

Scheduling research deadlines is an instrumental factor in scholarly productivity. Keeping a database of current research projects which includes the stage of research one is at as well as the estimated time table for data collection, data analysis, results write-up and submission date is an efficient way to keep on track. Try scheduling research team meetings with those who are collaborating on the research on a daily basis..

Conclusion

In conclusion, succeeding as an early career professor takes commitment and dedication. It is an adjustment that can be facilitated greatly by seeking out mentors and collaborators who can share their experiences. It is hoped that future research studies will continue to explore factors that contribute to the success of early career professors in school psychology.

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