Succeeding at an Academic Career.

Jeffrey Wiegley

jeffw@csun.edu

09/17/2004

"It is my ambition to say in ten sentences what others say in a whole book."   – *Nietzsche*

> "When a man sits with a pretty girl for an hour, it seems like a minute. But let him sit on a hot stove for a minute and it's longer than any hour. That's relativity."
> *– A. Einstein*

Time: A.k.a: "You get a lot of time off, don't you?"

Here's a rough weekly calculation:

Lectures	=	10	hours	Committee Work	=	2	hour
Grading	=	6	hours	Email	=	1	hours
Preparation	=	4	hours	Grad. Students	=	4	hours
Meetings	=	3	hours	Lab Work	=	2	hours
Advising	=	2	hours	paperwork	=	1	hour
Office Hours	=	4	hours	**Total**	=	39	hours

Hey, that's not so bad!

You even have a whole hour left in which to do research.

The reality of academia:

- Academia requires as much time as any other career.

- Those estimates are conservative at best

- Those estimates only account for the obvious

- 1 hour for research is clearly insufficient

- Students will consume as much time as you are willing to devote to them (and then a little bit more)

- There is no limit to the amount of time academia CAN consume.

- The breadth of academic responsibilities is greater than most other careers.

- The EA elevator alone will consume your remaining hour.

So how do we manage to succeed?

Notes/Stories/Comments:

- *The difficulty with an increase in breadth of responsibilities is that it results in excess time lost due to task switching. This may be why current thinking is that specialization in industry leads to improved productivity.*

Resources and Infrastructure:

- Choose an environment with at least the following:

  - Friendly, helpful co-workers.

  - A department Chair with psychic abilities.

  - A Dean who isn't bound by the laws of economics.

  - Omniscient support staff.

  - An institution that values your commitment.

- Treat the staff and assistants with respect!

Notes/Stories/Comments:

- *This humor on this slide is somewhat tongue in cheek because the selection of the items mention on this slide is outside of one's own control. The remaining slides deal with items that are within your own control.*

- *A colleague once, upon receiving his probationary appointment, proceeded to immediately think of the office staff as existing for the purpose of making his life easier. having a "Copy this for me" attitude resulted in ALL the office staff personnel disliking him. (Not just his department's; all the departments in the college)*

- *These people know more about your job when you get it and then inner workings of the institution than you do and making allies of them will make your entire career more enjoyable.*

Accepting responsibilities: Be prepared to say "No"!

- It takes tremendous effort to support and manage a community of over $30,000$ people. ($10,000 < 163$ cities $< 30,000$)

- There is always something more that needs doing.

- You can't do it all.

- Attempting too much defeats all your efforts.

- Budget small amounts of time to make continuous progress on important goals that cannot be accomplished in a short time frame.

- Don't worry about looking for responsibilities; they'll come looking for you!

Recognize your limits and say "No" to requests that exceed them.

Notes/Stories/Comments:

- *At first glance this slide appears to offer suggestions that result in you being unhelpful, or selfish, to the community in which you are trying to succeed. This presentation is about you succeeding as an individual.*

- *The advice offered here does not prevent group or community success but must be tempered with specific additional advice related to group goals, progress and success to obtain maximum success at those levels.*

Research: (And Long term goals)

- It's easy to lose sight of the long term goals.

- They don't demand priority like immediate tasks do.

- A learning oriented institution imposes a lot of immediate tasks.

- Long term goals often contribute more to our long term success.

- They represent achievement instead of just progress.

Set aside time for making continuous progress on the larger goals.

Try to combine your long term goals and daily duties to support and drive each other.

Notes/Stories/Comments:

- *One door in the EN building has a newspaper clipping that relates a story about an instructor that places a few large rocks in a jar. Then follows by filling the empty spaces with gravel and then fills the, yet remaining, space with sand. He then asks the students "what have we learned". One student replies incorrectly: "You can always fit more." The instructor corrects him with "If you don't put the big rocks in first you'll never get them in".*

- *Supervision of graduate students is an important immediate task; It is also an example of how you can blend these tasks with the long term goal of research progress and publication.*

Organization

How does one begin to cope with a nearly infinite amount of work
due in a finite amount of time?

Organization! And lots of it.

- – PDAs

  – Schedule programs

  – Day Planners

  – Post-it notes

  – Colored bits of string

  – E-mail folders, sub-folders, sub-sub-folders

  – Well organized file hierarchies.

Abandon or modify techniques and devices that don't work for you.

Evaluate what works for others; adopt new techniques.

Notes/Stories/Comments:

- *An example of extreme organization: On my desk sits a label maker. It is always handy and ready. Graduate students are surprised that the first thing I do after accepting to be on their committee is to proceed to produce a file with their name on it. This is done before forms are signed or even if they haven't given me a proposal copy. Yet the empty folder helps me keep track of how many students I have and who they are. It is very easy to sign a form and then forget about it only to discover a few months later that you are responsible for too many grad. students.*

- *As for adopting techniques: Paula Poundstone, a comedian, once said "You know how parent's cutely ask small children 'So, what are you gonna be when you grow up?' We ask because we're looking for ideas ourselves." The point is everyone, no matter how small, has different methods that may be of use to us but we haven't thought of on our own.*

Stand your ground

Students continuously test boundaries and take advantage where they can; even if doing so is not in their best interest.

- Set policies.

- Enforce them.

- Stick to them.

- Weakness serves no kindness.

- Be fair and objective.

- Wisdom is knowing what is your problem and what is not.
  - Fix what is your problem.
  - Accept the consequences for what cannot be fixed.

- Be compassionate.*

Notes/Stories/Comments:

- *Once you reduce any personal boundary it is nearly impossible to restore.*

- *Many policies that I have in place are geared for providing students what I think they need in order to succeed. This is frequently different than what they think they need or how they should receive it and causes them much grief. But if I give them what they think they need rather than what my relatively longer experience tells me will be useful to them then I don't feel that I am honoring the student's overall goals and best interest.*

- *Compassion does not equate to yielding to the problem or situation that the student presents with. Instead, Compassion is an honest communication that you understand the student's position and sympathize but that you cannot sacrifice your integrity to bail them out. This is still taking care of the student, but at an emotional level rather than correcting their physical situation.*

Expectations: Yours and the students'

- The quality of our graduates is a significant measure of our success.

- People rarely perform beyond what is expected of them.

- Expectation and evaluation are not the same.

A simple approach for improving students:

- Maintain extremely high expectations of students.

- Evaluate performance based on criteria consisting of more than whether or not expectations were met.

Be careful about responding to expectations that students place on you.

Notes/Stories/Comments:

- *Students, for instance, will expect you to give them all the answers during lecture. Doing so erodes your own boundaries and time and provides them with next to nothing.*

- *In project planning Gantt charts are often used with Critical Path planning. It has been found that people chew up exactly as much time is allowed to them because they are implicitly expected to. Altering the way you evaluate peoples' performance allows this to be broken. As a result Critical Chain management has arisen and allows project time-lines to be drastically shortened. But the expectations have to be modified for it to succeed.*

Planning:

The path to success is a struggle and, like a war, is highly fluid.

- Be prepared to change your plans.

- Change is not necessarily a setback.

- Beware of complacency and rigidity.

- Keep an eye open for opportunity.

- Don't blindly seize opportunities; evaluate them first.

- Don't be afraid to try something new; be unique.

One of the significant benefits afforded to you by a career in academia is the amount of authority granted to you to accomplish your responsibilities. Use it to secure your success.

Notes/Stories/Comments:

- *In project management theory all three of* Responsibility, Accountability, *and* Authority *are required in order to reach a successful result for any project. All three are rarely given to new employees at most employment positions. Take advantage of the fact that academia does.*

- *Control: Most people when asked to define "control" in relation to planning define it as "the exercise of power to influence events". Unfortunately, for at least projects, this definition is about the worst one possible. You cannot directly alter reality and people always react negatively others attempting to exert such control. You can only alter your own behaviors and goals. A better definition of control is "The assessment of current position in relation to desired goals in order to produce a modified behavior that either corrects the position or modifies the goal."*

- *The corollary to this is that the most flexible component of any system also exerts the most control. The most rigid component the least control. Be the flexible component!*

Distractions:

Avoid the bad; they wear you down and undermine your success:

- External or additional responsibilities.

- Efforts that forward the agendas of others instead of your own.

- Unavoidable chores and crisis.

Make time for the good; they feed your spirit and rejuvenate you:

- hobbies and interests

- Exercise and sports

- Personal growth and travel

- Humor

- Love

Notes/Stories/Comments:

- *In the past I have carried a small number of small business clients for which I did computer consulting. These were obtained before I started my academic career and now they are simply a pain that distracts me from my focus on my academic career.*

- *Sailing is fun! make time for it! (Or for whatever floats your boat)*

- *Try to have as much fun at your job as possible. Don't be afraid to act childish or whimsical with the students. Remember: They are much closer to an age where play is more important to them than work and they will respond well to an instructor that shares their attitude. (It doesn't rule out engaging in work; it just means you may have to get creative.)*

- *besides: "AlL woRk anD NO plaaay mAkEs JaCK a DuLL boy." (This means you too!)*

"The secret of success is this: there is no secret of success." – *E. Hubbard*

"If A equals success, then the formula is $A = X+Y+Z$, with X being work, Y play, and Z keeping your mouth shut.." – *A. Einstein*

Remember:

On some level we've already succeeded; We could be stuck in real jobs instead.