



NASP Technical Assistance Brief

ESSENTIAL TOOLS FOR PROSPECTIVE AND EARLY CAREER FACULTY

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BACKGROUND

The majority of recent school psychology graduates are employed in school-based settings (Guiney, 2010); only a small number choose to pursue academic careers. Accordingly, there exists a shortage of school psychology trainers (Little & Akin-Little, 2004). Despite awareness of the shortage of academic career pursuits in school psychology and the potential relationship this has to challenges in tackling such a role (see Little & Akin-Little; Stark, Perfect, Simpson, Schnoebelen, & Glenn, 2004), few if any resources currently exist to support early career school psychology faculty. The following are some key considerations for prospective and current early career academics.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Is an academic position right for you? If you are applying to a faculty position, you may have several employment options, such as working in the schools as a school psychologist, postdoctoral positions, research positions, or working with a specific population of students. When deciding whether an academic career is the right choice for you:

- **Discuss your options.** Identify trusted individuals with whom you can talk about your decision, including university faculty, practicum or internship supervisors, mentors (e.g., former supervisors), colleagues, peers, and family.
- **Remember, every academic position is different.** Positions vary in terms of expected emphases of the role, composition of faculty including opportunities for mentorship, level of degree offered to students, and program culture. *Do not make a decision to be or not to be an academic; instead, decide if a particular opening matches your interests and skills.*

What are the central roles and responsibilities of faculty? The three main roles of faculty are teaching, scholarship, and service, but the emphasis placed on each role varies. For example, first tier research universities place a higher emphasis on scholarship than other institutions, and comprehensive teaching universities put more emphasis on teaching. Although expectations for each role may differ per university, here are some definitions of what is generally expected of faculty:

- **Teaching.** Quality instruction and advising, the development of curriculum, and supervision embedded within courses.
- **Scholarship.** Research, publications, presentations, and grants.
- **Service.** Service to the institution (e.g., serving on committees), to the profession (e.g., involvement in state organizations or NASP), and to the community (e.g., consultation with a local school district).

How do faculty members achieve promotion and tenure? For prospective and early career academics, the promotion and tenure process can be anxiety-inducing (Stark et al., 2004). The tenure process has unique features at different institutions; however, becoming tenured typically requires successful achievement of faculty roles and responsibilities. Tenure-track faculty can apply for promotion or tenure approximately every 5 years and, if successful, move from assistant to associate to full professor. Some institutions allow for promotion and tenure earlier. Institutions also vary with regard to allowances for maternity leave prior to submitting tenure applications. It is advisable to talk with experienced colleagues early on to prepare for this process, and to learn the specifics regarding promotion and tenure at your institution. Here are some examples of what may be required:

- **An annual plan.** To be developed with the department head, including goals and benchmarks in the areas of instruction, scholarship, and service.
- **Documenting progress.** To be completed annually, and reviewed by the department head, this may include a personal statement regarding your work for the year as well as artifacts evidencing accomplishments (e.g., course evaluations, articles, presentation slides, program contributions).
- **Submission of a tenure dossier to be evaluated by promotion and tenure committee.** To be completed upon application for promotion and tenure and reviewed by colleagues.

What are the biggest challenges of being an early career academic? Being an early career faculty member brings several challenges. First of all, a steep learning curve includes (a) learning how to be a professor engaged in teaching, research, and service when your training may have emphasized being a practitioner or researcher; (b) developing content knowledge and staying up to date with developments in the field; (c) learning how to navigate the college or university system; and (d) learning how the educational system functions in your state. Second, eagerness about jumping into the new role can lead to taking on too much at once and feeling overwhelmed. The

following are a few tips for preventing and tackling some main challenges faced by early career academics.

- **Observe.** Sit in on colleagues' classes, observe the content and process of their instruction, and incorporate effective practices into your own instruction. Get into schools to learn how school psychologists function in your area. Conducting field visits for practicum students or interns presents a way to do this early on.
- **Seek out professional development.** Get involved in local, national, and international professional organizations, including attending workshops and conferences. Subscribe to journals, and discuss what you are learning and reading with your new colleagues.
- **Network.** Keep in touch with old friends and colleagues. Simultaneously spin webs in your new academic community.
- **Define your expertise.** Decide what your specific area(s) of interest are and push an agenda forward. Use your expanding network to connect with collaborators. Since your experiences are new, write about them; this is one way to produce scholarly work.
- **Ask questions.** When in doubt, always ask questions. If you are asked to do something and are unsure if you have the time, it is acceptable to state "I will think about it and get back to you" and discuss further with your supervisor.
- **Seek a mentor.** Some universities offer mentorship from a senior colleague. This can be a convenient and fruitful source of information and guidance. Mentorship from others outside of your university also can be very valuable.

What are the biggest rewards of being an early career academic? The rewards of being a new faculty member are innumerable and include:

- Engaging in an ongoing learning process;
- Offering fresh perspectives to colleagues;
- Bridging between research and practice;
- Developing mentoring relationships with students and faculty;
- Affecting future generations of school psychologists (directly) and the individuals they will serve (indirectly);
- Benefiting from tuition reimbursement for dependents, professional development stipends, and typically excellent health benefits;
- Enjoying a flexible schedule;
- Gaining more opportunities (and rewards) to participate in state and national professional organizations (i.e., in the service role of faculty member);
- Having opportunities to conduct research by collaborating with school-based practitioners who have research questions and access to subjects but need statistical expertise.

In sum, despite some challenges in taking on an academic role, a faculty career can be seen as an opportunity "to do it all" (Stark et al., 2004, p. 395)—teaching, supervision, scholarship, and practice. Given the shortage of trainers in school psychology, the decision to become a school psychology program faculty member is not *only* a personal choice; it is one that can make substantial professional contributions to our field.

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February 2012

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