

Succeeding in Academe— Self-Management and Passion

Lon N. Larson

INTRODUCTION

I am honored to be writing the “old timer’s” perspective on beginning a career in academe. I find the academic life to be very fulfilling. I love learning and being a part of a community of learners. I delight in working with students, and I am awed to find myself in a position to touch their lives. I believe that, as an educator, I am part of a noble mission and that society benefits from my work. The academic life is not a life of leisure; if done right, it requires lots of hard work, but the rewards are tremendous (nonmonetary rewards, that is). My theme is simple: moving up the ranks as a professor requires self-management—more specifically, being “flexibly focused” and balancing personal and community goals—but deriving fulfillment from the work requires passion. Before developing these ideas, I want to explain who I am and why I wanted to write this essay.

As I write this, I am in my seventeenth year of teaching. Before my academic career, I worked eight years in community health planning and health insurance. My discipline is social and administrative pharmacy. I have taught at two disparate institutions: the University of Arizona and Drake University. Scholarship and graduate education were

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my highest priorities at Arizona, while professional education is my prime concern at Drake. I was promoted from Assistant to Associate Professor at Arizona and promoted to Professor at Drake. I earned tenure at both institutions. I have been lucky enough to win some awards. At Drake, I have been named the university's Mentor of the Year and the Pharmacy Teacher of the Year. However, I am not a superstar. I don't consider myself a "natural" at academic duties. Perhaps this is advantageous in this assignment. As my mother used to tell me when I was having trouble learning something, "Sometimes the person who has to work hard at mastering a subject or skill can explain it better than the person who acquires the skill easily and without much effort." (These may not have been her exact words, but they convey the sentiment.) I've worked hard to become a better member of the academy; hence, I hope I can provide insights about academic life that the reader finds helpful.

Why did I find this project so interesting? First, I was thrilled at the opportunity to help junior faculty get acclimated to the academy. I have thoroughly enjoyed life as a professor. I have found it challenging, rewarding, and just plain fun. For me, it has been a great career, and I think it can be the same for many others (but certainly not everyone). What a great gift I would be giving if, through this essay, I helped a junior professor find the fulfillment that I have found in the academy. Unlike scholarly publications, which convey information but do little to influence the reader's life, this project provided me with the unique opportunity to write a personal narrative. In this forum, I could perhaps provide the reader with useful information or needed encouragement. In essence, I could serve as a mentor, and potentially assist junior faculty, through my writing.

Second, I love the university and what it represents: a community of learners—faculty as well as students—seeking truth, openly debating ideas, exploring and learning about themselves and their world. However, as its critics are quick to point out, the university is not perfect. Academic freedom and tenure have been abused; arrogance is too common; and accountability is perhaps too rare. The university can be improved. As with all institutions, if the university hopes to realize its potential and fulfill its societal purpose, it must have good personnel—especially good faculty. If my words could attract, retain, or enhance the performance of even one bright young faculty member, I would have provided a great service to an institution I love and a mission I support.

Third, this essay provided an opportunity to write about work. I think meaningful work is one of life's great blessings. I also have many unanswered questions about work: What is the relationship between one's

work and self-fulfillment? What role does work play in finding meaning in life? What does a person gain, if anything, from working hard (or is it merely a syndrome requiring therapy)? Why does one person find a particular job satisfying while another finds it boring? What does one need to do to make his or her work meaningful? Given the importance of work in our lives, I believe questions such as these are worthy of contemplation.

In sum, my goal in this project is to provide food for thought (I am hesitant to label it as advice) that junior professors may find useful in getting adjusted to academic life and that senior professors may perhaps find useful in renewal. In so doing, I hope to stimulate readers to think about why they are in academe, what they hope to give others, and what they hope to gain for themselves. Given the diversity of the audience—including many academic disciplines and differing university missions—my comments are quite general. The issues and problems I discuss are common to all faculty. I do not get into the mechanics of teaching, scholarship, and service, which I assume the new professor already knows (or is quickly learning). The content of the essay is organized according to my two major themes: self-management and passion. In the interests of full disclosure, I must confess that I preach better than I practice. Every pitfall I discuss, I have experienced (and will likely do again).

As a final introductory comment, I want to clarify success and how it is measured. Success in academic life can be measured in a couple of ways. First, it can be measured by the receipt of tenure and/or promotions to higher levels of professorship. This is an “other-oriented” view of success. Performance in teaching, scholarship, and service is reviewed and evaluated by others and judged by them to be worthy of promotion and/or tenure. In like fashion, others may be impressed by a colleague who is promoted or tenured. While this type of success is critical for a long-term academic career (since, for many faculty positions, continued employment requires tenure), it should not become the basis for self-evaluation. The second way of measuring success is internal. This is an exercise in self-reflection, focusing on the question: Am I continuously improving my abilities to perform activities that I find enjoyable and meaningful? The external and internal assessments of success may not be congruent. While social forces emphasize the former, I think each of us needs to assess his or her own success, independent of what others may think (at least, to the extent that this is humanly possible). I encourage junior professors to look beyond tenure; achieving tenure or promotion is not the ultimate definition of success.

SELF-MANAGEMENT IN ACADEMIC LIFE

The function of management can be viewed as using resources to reach a goal. For the professor, the resources are time and energy, and the goal is “academic net worth.” I use this phrase to refer to documented outcomes or accomplishments. A professor’s academic net worth is detailed in his or her curriculum vitae and teaching portfolio and includes grants and publications, service activities, and teaching experiences and effectiveness. These documents are used in making promotion/tenure decisions. They also are what colleges review in selecting new faculty. Ultimately, it is academic net worth that is relevant in promotion and tenure reviews.

I include teaching portfolio because without it, I fear teaching receives too little attention, both in external assessments and in our own self-assessments. For scholarship, we have two widely understood indicators of performance: grants and peer-reviewed publications. These are detailed in the vitae. Similar indicators for teaching and service are not available; data in the vita are often limited to quantity of work in these areas, with no hint of quality or effectiveness. Thus, there is little incentive to improve teaching. For those who are primarily teachers (I am one), there is little chance to show the results of their efforts. A teaching portfolio rectifies this situation. It includes such information as teaching philosophy, teaching methods and their rationale, course syllabi, and data documenting teaching effectiveness. The portfolio allows teaching to play a larger role in academic net worth.

Professors, compared to other employees, are quite independent (but not totally independent, as discussed later). This independence is both good and bad. Independence is one of the most attractive features of being a professor. Professors can say what they want, choose the questions they want to explore and investigate, participate in their choice of service activities, and, within bounds, select the content they teach and the methods by which they teach it. The professor does not “punch a clock” or “take orders from a boss.” Although the department chair may help set priorities and monitor progress, on a day-to-day basis, the professor is allowed to decide how to spend his or her time and mental energy.

Along with the independence, the professor has a very open-ended position description. The professor is responsible for teaching, scholarship, and service. While the priority assigned to each of these functions varies, every professor is doing some combination of these three functions. The problem is that each of these three has an insatiable appetite—each can consume all of a professor’s time and energy. Every

activity the professor performs can be enlarged or enhanced: a class session can be better planned, a manuscript or grant application can be revised and rewritten, comments on students' papers can be more detailed, more attention can be given to advisees, and the list goes on and on. These are all worthwhile activities (some affect the welfare of students and colleagues), and they deserve to be performed conscientiously. Given such an open-ended job description and the high level of independence in setting priorities, every professor faces the quandary of having too many things to do and too little time to do them.

I see two major dilemmas in self-management for the professor. One is to stay focused, but flexibly so. This apparent contradiction will be explained later. As the professor scurries about, trying to cope with a never-ending list of things to do (all of which can be improved), it's easy to become wrapped up in all the activity and lose sight of the desired objective. The situation may be likened to that of a bird flying south for the winter: what matters to the bird is how far it flies, not how many times it flaps its wings.¹ With all that they have to do and all the demands placed upon them, it's easy for professors to start "flapping around" and forget what they want to accomplish.

To help the professor stay focused, I think planning and self-monitoring are essential. This builds upon, and goes beyond, the annual faculty plans that many universities require. The goal here is not so much a neat-looking document as it is a usable road map. Every professor should have a work plan that specifies the activities that will be done and when. This work plan should be quite specific and detailed; the greater the specificity, the greater the value. In developing the work plan, the professor should thoughtfully answer these questions pertaining to output, effort, and personal development, respectively:

- What do I want to accomplish? What additions or changes will be made in my curriculum vitae or teaching portfolio?
- What activities will I perform and when? How will I spend my time?
- What skills do I want to improve?

A work plan is worthless if it is not accompanied by monitoring. Monitoring—comparing actual progress against what was anticipated—is essential if the professor is to focus on "the distance traveled." Regardless of how often formal reviews are done with the department chair, professors should frequently conduct self-monitoring, in which they critically assess their progress and prospects. These self-evaluations

should be honest. In areas of deficiency, developing strategies to get back on track is more useful than merely justifying the lack of production. Ultimately, professors are judged on the basis of their output, their academic net worth.

A related issue is balancing focus and flexibility. Every professor is presented with unforeseen opportunities. These may be in teaching, but more likely, in scholarship or service. They may be very attractive, but as luck has it, they seldom fit precisely with the professor's plans. The professor is left with the dilemma: follow the plan (first choice) with its uncertainty (it may not work out as anticipated) or seize the new opportunity (second choice) that is certain. I think these are some of the most difficult decisions a professor makes, especially junior faculty. Deciding whether to pursue the opportunity requires thoughtful consideration of its cost and benefits. In assessing the benefits of an unforeseen opportunity, these questions may be helpful:

- Is it in an area of interest that I want to develop?
- How may it enhance my skills or reputation?
- Will it lead to other projects?
- Can the experience be used in some other fashion? For instance, a service activity may have publication potential, or contract research with little chance of publication may provide support for a graduate student.
- Will the project be enjoyable?

However, a new project comes with a cost, and an informed decision requires that this cost be considered. For the professor, the cost is the other opportunities that will be left undone because time is spent on the new endeavor; opportunity cost refers to opportunities lost. In other words:

- What project(s) will be delayed, discarded, or done less thoroughly if this one is pursued?

An example may help bring some of this to life. When I was asked to write this essay, I already had a full schedule. For the reasons detailed earlier, I found the project interesting. In addition, as a publication, it represented academic net worth. Yet, something would have to be sacrificed—a trade-off would have to be made. I don't know exactly what was left undone because of this essay, but the most likely suspects are a teaching innovation that I had planned to develop and fewer evenings at

home with nothing to do. In essence, the cost of this essay was potentially less student learning, a weaker teaching portfolio, less time with family, and less sleep. A professor's most valuable assets are time and energy. They must be spent consciously and judiciously.

A second dilemma in self-management is the balance between individualism and communitarianism, in other words, the balance between "doing my own thing" and "being a team player." Faculty independence and academic freedom have their limits. Professors have responsibilities to their learning communities that go beyond enhancing their own academic reputation or net worth. Narrowly, this community responsibility can be seen as serving on university committees, but more broadly (and I believe more accurately), the responsibility involves improving the quality of learning that takes place within the university.

Trends in pharmacy education suggest a move toward communitarianism and broader community responsibilities for the professor, especially in teaching and program assessment. Many colleges have initiatives to improve learning, and as a result, professors may have to compromise their preferred teaching strategies for the betterment of the community. For instance, some schools offer integrated, interdisciplinary courses that require team members to collaborate—and compromise—on course design and teaching methods. Another initiative is making classes more active and shifting the perspective of classroom performance from teaching centered to learning centered. As a final example, if writing or speaking is emphasized throughout the curriculum, then many faculty from several disciplines are affected. The increased attention on assessing curricular outcomes also promotes communitarianism. Here, the curriculum is seen as a single entity rather than the sum of several independent components. As such, the assessment is of the collective efforts of the faculty. It encourages professors to work together, to see how their respective pieces of the puzzle can better fit together for the benefit of student learning.

The dilemma for the professor is to balance these community goals with the personal goal of acquiring academic net worth (documented outcomes). For example, grading and critiquing student papers may be essential for enhancing student learning but may generate little net worth. While time spent on this activity may benefit students and the community by improving the quality of learning, it does little to benefit the stature of the professor. Devoting time and energy to the learning community has an opportunity cost, which may be reduced personal credentials or less academic net worth. This poses a dilemma for colleges as well. If colleges expect professors to be committed com-

munitarians and to spend more time on teaching and assessment—per the wishes of the community—then less time is available to generate academic net worth. Expectations concerning faculty performance for tenure or promotion may need to be adjusted. This is a very complex issue for individuals and institutions. I think it is worthy of personal reflection and public discussion.

I want to close this section on self-management with two bits of advice. One is highlighted by Franklin Roosevelt's rule that "energy is more efficient than efficiency" (1). In other words, at the core of being productive is hard work. Self-management without hard work is worth little. Self-management can augment hard work, but not replace it. The second point comes from advice I first heard in the context of baseball. It goes like this: "Sometimes you get in a slump, and nothing seems to go right. Other times, you get 'hot' and everything goes your way. You have to learn not to get too down on yourself during the slumps . . . nor too proud of yourself during the hot streaks."² I suspect every professor has both "slumps" (disinterested students, a manuscript or grant rejected) and "hot streaks" (great class discussion, teacher of the year, request to write a manuscript). Avoiding self-flagellation and self-aggrandizement improves the quality of academic work life.

PASSION IN ACADEMIC LIFE

The previous section described the importance of self-management in academic life and presented some thoughts on how to manage that life more effectively. While self-management may enable the professor to earn tenure and promotion, I am quite sure that self-management is not what makes an academic career meaningful. Rather, the meaning and joy of academic life derive from the attitudes of the professor—the passion and caring that he or she brings to the job. I believe three passions are important in finding fulfillment in an academic life (and perhaps all careers). These passions can apply to teaching, scholarship, and service, although my discussion focuses on teaching.

Fulfillment in academic life is enhanced if the professor has a passion for lifelong learning and continuous self-improvement. This may be phrased as striving for excellence. This passion brings freshness to work. No one wants to be in a rut or routine that, through its regularity and familiarity, grinds the joy out of work. Most of us will not experience the same kind of adventures as Professor Indiana Jones (nor may all of us want to), but even ordinary professorial work can be exciting

and new. Scholarship, by definition, is exploring and testing new ideas. Teaching can be an exercise in lifelong learning and continuous improvement. For instance, using current theory and published research, teaching innovations are designed and implemented. Then their effectiveness is assessed, and revisions are made. This is scholarly teaching (2). (This is not the same as scholarship of teaching, which requires more external review.) When one considers the many elements involved in a course or other learning experience—assignments and student projects, classroom activities, assessing student performance, and evaluating teaching effectiveness—the learning potential of teaching becomes clear. I try to be a scholarly teacher, and I can vouch that it keeps teaching new and fresh. I learn every time I teach a course. As with most learning, not all the lessons are pleasant, but the process is never dull.

Second, fulfillment in academic life is enhanced with a passion for the welfare of students, that is, if the professor cares about his/her students. This passion has two aspects. One, the professor realizes the great influence that he or she can potentially have on students. In Robert Smith's words, it is the potential to "unleash the greatness" in a student (3). I, for one, am humbled by the magnitude of this power. Most of us can relate to this phenomenon more easily by considering the teachers who most influenced us, rather than by thinking of ourselves as the ones who can unleash greatness. The second aspect is that student-teacher relationships are welcomed and fostered by the professor (4). Students are novice learners and novice professionals; they need mentors and role models. Mentoring relationships—in which the teacher serves as a trusted guide or advisor for the student—can be very meaningful for both student and professor. Probably my fondest memories in academe involve working with or advising a student one-to-one. Mentoring relationships are perhaps easier and more commonly developed with graduate students, but they are equally meaningful when developed with undergraduate or professional students.

Third, fulfillment in academic life is enhanced if the professor has a passion for the value of education. How do individuals and society benefit from college education, and more specifically, pharmacy education? If a professor does not see the value of education, it's hard to imagine much fulfillment being derived from doing the work of a professor. Hopefully, professors see the value of what they teach and how it fits into the education of the student. For instance, I believe that pharmacy students benefit from a good, solid grounding in the social and administrative sciences because it enhances their abilities to be caring clinicians, advocates for the community's health, rational users of lim-

ited resources, and effective participants in shaping organizational and public policies. On a broader level, there is the value of the entire educational experience. The value of pharmacy education may be seen as extending beyond enabling the student to practice pharmacy competently, to providing the student with a liberal education that influences all aspects of life (3, 4). With such an education, students are better able to analyze and perhaps influence the events of their time and to reflect upon and savor the experiences of their lives. One professor cannot do this alone; but by working with others in the learning community, the individual professor can influence the entire educational experience of the student.

The professor's passion for teaching can be easily drained. This may be what afflicts older professors who seem to have lost their enthusiasm or zeal. (This is an affliction that concerns me greatly, since I am at or near the age of highest risk.) I mention two factors that I find draining. One is the inability to measure my effectiveness in teaching. We all need to see the fruits of our labors. We need that kind of feedback to keep working hard. I find the fruits of my teaching labors difficult to measure. I cannot easily assess the effects of my efforts on student learning, nor can I easily measure my progress as a teacher. I know I am working harder than ever, but I have little evidence of its effects. This makes it difficult to continue. A second drain is the disinterested student. Just as the enthusiastic student gives me energy, the disinterested one absorbs it. My energy level throughout a day is affected noticeably by the quality of classroom discussion. A good discussion gives me energy, while I am exhausted after a poor one. I wish I could grow a thicker skin without becoming callused. I think all professors need to accept the fact that they are not going to please all the students all the time.

In sum, if a professor has a passion for self-improvement, cares about the welfare of students, and believes in the value of education, he or she is likely to find fulfillment in academic work. As a professor, I see myself in the front lines of the fight against ignorance and closed-mindedness. I can imagine few causes as noble, and I can imagine no way to have a more fulfilling work life.

CLOSING COMMENTS

In closing, I think being a professor is just about the best job there is. As a means of summarizing my thoughts in the essay, here is the advice I have for the prospective or beginning professor:

1. Work hard. As my mother used to say, “You get out of it what you put into it.” This is certainly the case in academic work.
2. Your resources are your time and energy. Use them wisely.
- 3a. Stay focused. Have a work plan and monitor yourself often.
- 3b. Be flexible. Seize opportunities when they arise, but remember that saying “yes” comes with an opportunity cost.
4. Think in terms of academic net worth (documented outcomes) in your curriculum vitae and teaching portfolio. This is the currency in which your value in academe is measured.
5. Contribute to your learning community (university and college). Improve the quality of learning that occurs there.
6. Balance #4 and #5. They are both essential, but not necessarily compatible.
7. Your influence as a teacher can be profound, so work hard at it.
8. Remember your purpose. It’s much like bricklayers: one may focus on bricks and mud while another imagines the cathedral that is being built. The second finds more fulfillment.
9. Be passionate about what you do. Enjoy it. Have fun.

NOTES

1. The bird analogy was adapted from Edward Suchman, *Evaluative Research*.
2. Author unknown.

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