Tips for New Faculty
August 2014

Please note: Our suggestions will focus on teaching and service because research advice is so dependent on discipline and department. More info for new faculty can be found at: http://go.gwu.edu/newfac

Teaching

• Don’t reinvent the wheel. Borrow and modify content, especially well-tested homework, assignments, and projects while getting your feet on the ground.

• Visit your classroom once before the start of the semester. You own it for the duration of the class, so make it feel like home to you. Move things around if you need to and if it is reasonable. It will also help calm the butterflies before your first class. Don’t worry about appearing nervous in the first few classes.

• Try not to lecture for more than 15-20 minutes at a stretch. Research shows that students learn best by doing. Give students something to DO between bursts of lecture, for example:
  o Solve a problem in groups of three or four students.
  o Initiate a class-wide discussion of pros and cons (of whatever).

• Know that students can learn from each other. Don’t be afraid to assign collaborative learning homework or assignments, when they seem possible.

• Write down learning objectives for every class:
  Avoid thinking, “I must cover topics X and Y.” Instead, try “What key concepts or skills do I want students to have learned by the end of the class in the broad areas of X and Y?” Then, consider what you can have students DO in class to help them learn X and have them finish the remaining pieces in Y by themselves.

• Start a class with something interesting. Avoid saying, “Well, last time, we talked about X.” Instead, for example, find an interesting stat about X: “Did you know that …?”

• End every class with a summary. Tell students what you had expected them to learn, and tell them what’s due. If there is material online that students need to see, tell them before you leave. Alternate this with asking the students to summarize. For instance, they could do this in teams of four; you will call on a team spokesperson and write down key points contributed by each team.

• Cue the most important concepts with meta-level language and encouragement. For example, say, “Here is the really interesting thing, the cornerstone of this whole argument …” or for difficult concepts, “A lot of students find this difficult at difficult at first, and are able to master this with a little effort, so pay extra attention …”

• Bring out the YOU in you. Avoid formal, stilted lecturing. Instead, speak conversationally and let students get to know the real you – they will respond better.

• Get to know the students by name. If you have fewer than 50 students, there is no excuse – memorize names by the 4th week. With more than 50 students, you can use a seating chart and ask students to sit in designated seats, with name tents.

• Be consistent in keeping your office hours and set a reasonable email policy. You should not have to respond with long essay-type emails. If you are going to be away, make reasonable arrangements (e.g., a TA or colleague, Skype, an online class via Blackboard).

• Don’t be afraid to experiment with teaching. Like research, all good teaching involves a degree of experimentation.

• Set challenging homework and assignments but reasonable exams. Give students three times the time you yourself need for the exam (yes, you should do the exam and time yourself), and only allow 10-15% of the questions to separate the A’s from the B’s.
• **Use Blackboard efficiently.** Blackboard can help you with mass emails, tracking submissions and grades, automated test deployment/grading and more – learn to use the features that suit your needs. The Instructional Technology Lab (itl.gwu.edu) offers support and training.

• **Clarify academic integrity issues.** Refer them to the GW Code of Academic Integrity, and set your own if need be. If you are going to allow teamwork and collaboration, spell out the rules.

• **Take advantage of UTLC programs and services.** The University Teaching and Learning Center offers faculty-led programs, like the Faculty Learning Community for junior faculty, and consultations for course/assignment design and teaching.

**Service**

• **Be proactive about committees.** Ask to be on the committees that will benefit your career, like the graduate admissions committee. Being proactive helps you say “no” to other committees. Learn how to say “no” by consulting your mentors.

• **Pay attention to department/school culture.** Initially, pay attention to the unwritten rules of long-standing committees run by senior faculty. There’s often a “culture” with such committees; even if you think you know better, try to learn the current culture and work with it before changing the world. Don’t give up on changing the world.

**In General**

• **Don’t be on your own.** Get mentors for at least a few years, for both research and teaching. Meet your mentors often – it is not a sign of weakness.

• **Manage your time carefully:**
  o Mark off course prep time that is manageable (see “don’t reinvent the wheel” above).
  o Do some research every day, even if it is to skim through a paper you would like to read.
  o Set aside time to meet with mentors and peers at least once a week, to talk about your experiences, ask for help, or merely riff on ideas.
  o Block out a few hours each day and at least one day a week for “quiet time”, during which you turn off email and devices, and focus on research. Really. If you have your research time set, you can feel more comfortable with the time devoted to teaching.

**References**


