



WHAT MATTERS - NSF DTS INTERVIEWS

BALANCING YOUR CAREER & PERSONAL LIFE

For faculty at an early career stage, it is difficult to figure out how to balance responsibilities for research and teaching while having a personal life— any advice for them and for faculty at any stage?

Make Time for What Matters

One of my best post doc mentors took me aside and asked, when you are on your death bed, is it more likely that you will wish you had written another few papers or had spent more time with your kids?

This is essential, life-altering advice. Scientists begin with simple curiosity and it grows into a motivating, rewarding, and sometimes, consuming passion. Unfortunately I know a few who turned their backs on their humanity along the way.

Balance is essential, but the professional pressures all go the wrong way. Universities ask more and more of faculty, and the best departments can create a culture of ambition and competition that is corrosive. Careers have an arc, and everyone is quick to point out if someone seems to have slowed their ascent. Academics are intensely self-motivated, and it doesn't take much of this external "fuel" for balance to be lost entirely.

That's the bad news. The good news/advice I give is that you can and should make your own path. Write fewer but stronger papers. Think outside the "box" of your discipline from time to time. If teaching inspires you, do it; you will get your reward from all the lives you touch.

Let your sense of balance be a positive on any dysfunction you may have in your own academic setting. Never neglect family and friends; if you are like most scientists, you owe them an enormous debt. My favorite scientists are also excellent human beings.

Understand Career Stages

How I have spent my time has evolved substantially over the course of my career, as research and teaching opportunities and family circumstances have changed. At different career stages I have spent different relative amounts of time on research, education, and my personal life. I have been fortunate to belong to a department, campus, and discipline that have been supportive of my diverse interests and their evolution over time.

Aim High

It is a risk, especially in the context of an institutional culture, when anything you do that takes you away from research is a risk. This has to change. My advice: whatever you are doing— in research or in education— do it extraordinarily well. Make it high quality. Make sure what you do is documented to make you visible as a valuable faculty member. The quality of your work is the key.

Interviews with NSF Distinguished Teaching Scholars (DTS)

The NSF Director's Award for Distinguished Teaching Scholars (DTS) recognizes and rewards individuals who have contributed significantly to the scholarship of their discipline and to the education of students in STEM, and exemplify the ability to integrate their research and educational activities.

Invited to interview DTS scholars, Jeanne Narum asked them questions such as the following:

- ◆ If a visitor were to come into your classroom/lab— the environment in which you work with students— what impression would s/he leave with?
- ◆ What brought you to an interest in "advancing the frontiers of education" and to connecting your research to that work?
- ◆ For faculty at an early career stage, it is difficult to figure out how to balance responsibilities for research and teaching while having a personal life; any advice— for them and for faculty at any stage?

These words of wisdom are distilled from answers that that final question. They are of value to faculty at an early career stage as well as for those who seek to mentor and nurture emerging distinguished teaching scholars.



BALANCING YOUR CAREER & PERSONAL LIFE

Learn to Say No

There will be times when you will have to say “no” even to attractive opportunities because they conflict with other commitments. There will be times when you discover yourself to be over-committed.

Then you have to reconcile yourself either to doing a job that is not what you had hoped it would be or to negotiate your way out of one of the commitments.

Those are both important strategies and far superior to beating yourself up or getting anxious and frazzled. One last trick I learned, perhaps specific to the sciences, is that by using the research in the teaching and vice versa, you gain time. Give the students in a course a project assignment in which they work in small groups and write a group report.

This gives them practice in group activities, develops their ability to critique written work, and results in fewer papers that need to be graded! And if the projects are related to literature that you want to learn about for the research effort, so much the better.

Find the Right Balance

Maintaining a sense of humor, establishing a good network of friends and colleagues, nurturing good relationships with one’s students, and getting time for oneself may be key ingredients for flourishing as a leader in undergraduate education, while perched atop the tightrope.

Given the nature of teaching and research, a faculty member stands the chance of being completely consumed by the work and risks losing contact with friends and family.

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One should be a professor for the love of teaching and research. If one is working too hard to enjoy it then something is wrong

Faculty at an early career stage should guard their personal time vigorously, lest they burn out and lose the energy and passion that brought them to academia in the first place.

Each must determine for her- or himself what that balance might be (given institutional tenure requirements, etc.), but when signs of stress begin to appear (difficulty sleeping, loss of concentration, or anxiety, for example) one has probably crossed the threshold.

I seriously doubt that the “balance” is a fixed value, so we should assess how we’re doing on a regular basis throughout our careers, which will hopefully evolve and keep us challenged and productive.

Indeed, some faculty at later stages in their careers may be less concerned with balancing career and personal life than they are with declining enthusiasm for their work.

Having been around faculty who have been teaching and doing research for over thirty years and who continue to be energized by their work, several of my suggestions for junior faculty may apply to more seasoned faculty, particularly maintaining a network of friends and colleagues, maintaining the sense of connectedness with others who share a commitment to education and research.

Further, working to be integrated into one’s scholarly societies and professional organizations, as well as to contribute as educators and researchers, can be very powerful salves for waning career interest.

Energy and passion are infectious. Friends and colleagues will often generously share theirs to give a much needed boost to those of us who are feeling less than enthusiastic about our careers. A phone call to an old friend— and colleague— can be a very important first step in getting us out of a career slump.



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Know the Rules

Find out the real rules for getting tenure at your place and follow them. You can't help reform the system if you're not in it. My hope is that even if the real rules are slanted too heavily towards research, your interest in teaching will remain alive and you can let it grow some more once you earn tenure.

Understand the System

The bottom line with respect to promotion to tenure at a major research university is the unequivocal demonstration of accomplishment and potential for continued excellence in research.

What this means is that a junior faculty member must be careful not to ignore this reality and avoid giving up energy and resources that will endanger the ability to achieve an excellent research component to his/her tenure dossier.

Teaching performance is considered an important component of the dossier, but is not likely to compensate for an undistinguished research performance. Thus, good mentoring is required for the untenured faculty member, not only on how to balance teaching versus research, but also to understand what is expected of them.

Make a Plan

It has always struck me as odd that faculty never or rarely miss a class, yet will often pass up on research commitments and scheduled reading and writing.

Even though research productivity is rewarded and expected for professional advancement, it is the case that many faculty will only schedule their teaching.

Block out time every day for writing and doing research. Just as teaching commitments get scheduled and have to be met, so too should writing, reading, and researching be scheduled, with those commitments taking priority over any unscheduled activities.

I am not advocating a lack of flexibility, but establishing a priority system aligned with the reward structure of an academic institution.

Enjoy What You Do

Only that the personal life is very important and should not take a back seat to the pressures of getting tenure. One should be a professor for the love of teaching and research. If one is working too hard to enjoy it then something is wrong. ■

