

When Do You Stop Being an Early Career Scholar?

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I had an experience recently that confirmed what I'd already suspected: I am no longer an early career scholar. Perhaps because of my age, or simply because I am pre-tenure, I had still considered myself to be "early" in my career until that moment.

It happened a week before my discipline's biggest conference. As I was checking the online schedule for pre-meeting workshops, I found an intriguing one for "early career scholars of color." But after reading the agenda, I realized I wouldn't benefit from the content. The lineup included sessions on developing career goals, publishing a dissertation, preparing for the job market, crafting a strong CV, negotiating a job offer, publishing your first book, finding a mentor. As an assistant professor, I'd already done those things. I read the list multiple times, searching, to no avail, for at least one applicable session. Then I posted on Facebook, asking the world: "When do you stop being an early career scholar?"

The consensus was clear: Ph.D.s are considered early career until we earn tenure and/or for the first five to seven years of our postgraduate career (whether or not we are in a tenure-track position). However, the professional-development opportunities for early career scholars mostly focus on graduate students and brand-new faculty members, and fail to address the professional concerns of people like me — an advanced assistant professor on the downward slope of the early career hill.

Signs that you're over the hill. Advanced assistant professor is not an official rank — there are no formal changes in job description or expectations — but it is common lingo among academics. The term is used to describe people in Years 5 and 6 on the tenure track who are no longer considered "new," yet are not associate professors (which usually happens in Year 6 or 7). If you are currently in this period of limbo, you can attest to some very obvious changes in your professional life.

The structural protections in place when you started your career are now mostly gone. There are no more reprieves from committee service or advising, no more release time from teaching, and no more course-development grants. You've spent your start-up funds, and the faculty mentor you were assigned has been missing in action for a year or more. You need a new computer but it won't be part of a hiring package, and it certainly won't come with an updated version of the software you need to analyze your research data. Your scholarship has broadened into new areas but your institution will still only send you to one conference a year (if that).

To add salt to the wound, decreased support is coupled with increased job expectations for an advanced assistant professor:

- Just as you've gotten comfortable teaching your handful of mostly lower-level courses, you're assigned new responsibilities — teaching a senior seminar and advising more graduate students, including doctoral candidates. Whereas you once *sought* advice from senior professors, you are now *giving* advice to graduate students and first-year faculty members.
- You are asked to be on more serious committees at the institutional level, and may become an associate or assistant chair within your department.
- You're now a known commodity so you receive noticeably more invitations to campus events that you didn't even know existed in your first few years on the job. Word has gotten out to students, too, and some you've never seen in your classroom show up during office hours to introduce themselves and chat.

Lurking behind all of those day-to-day activities is the reality that you soon will have to start preparing tenure documents. You check the tenure requirements at least once a month, comparing them to your CV. You solicit sample materials from newly tenured colleagues, hoping to find inspiration for your own seemingly boring teaching statement. You schedule teaching observations, make lists of possible external reviewers (if that's allowed at your

institution), and email editors to make sure that your work is going to be published in time for tenure. Other people's tenure announcements overwhelm your social media, and your own anxiety increases accordingly.

Then, when you finally have a moment that doesn't involve thinking about work, family and friends remind you that, just as your professional life has progressed, so should your personal life.

The assumption is that by Year 5, you are settled enough in your career to stop prioritizing work and start prioritizing yourself. Enter questions about marriage and parenting timelines, along with expectations of upward financial mobility. Well-meaning friends advise you to stop throwing your money away with rent and buy a house. You can afford it ... you're a professor. They ask why you are still driving that car and why you never attend mutual friends' destination weddings. Family and nonacademic friends don't seem to understand that, despite earning a decent salary for five years, you still have mountains of debt from the time when you were busily earning your Ph.D. and searching for a tenure-track job.

Phew.

Preparing to climb, yet again. Managing all of that can be physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausting. But the reality is this: We were just as stressed in graduate school and during Years 1 and 2 as new faculty members. We made it this far by being strategic and thoughtful.

All of which is why — instead of lamenting over my ever-expanding duties as an advanced assistant professor and an associate chair whose tenure file is due in five months (gulp) — I've tried to use this time as an opportunity to reflect on where I've been and where I intend to go. Here's my advice for those of you who are already advanced assistant professors or soon will be:

- Write a new five-year plan. It should serve as an overview of what will eventually become your tenure statement. Here is where you detail an updated research agenda, including types and timelines of publications. You should also think about service as something you do for the discipline, not just the institution. What professional organizations should you be a member of? Are there opportunities to serve on a board? And finally, be strategic about your core course offerings. Make sure you are teaching across all levels — not just first-year courses but upper-level ones and graduate seminars (if your institution offers them).
- If you haven't already, create profiles on academic social networking sites like [Academia](#), [ResearchGate](#), or [ScholarlyHub](#). Such sites offer easy ways to advertise your work and to track how many people are reading it. There are also opportunities to connect with people doing similar research.
- Collaborate with colleagues at other institutions. Most departments allow you to submit external letters for your tenure file so who better than someone with whom you've worked closely? Plus, you may be able to get a couple more publications out of these collaborations, even if it's as second author.

- Accept requests to review articles for journals and presses. Such requests give you an opportunity to learn what other people in your field are doing and thinking about, and to see examples of great and no-so-great articles and book proposals.
- Similarly, serve on a grant-review panel. It is a common misconception that you have to have received a grant in order to review grant proposals. While that work is time consuming, the experience is incredibly valuable if you intend to apply for a state or national grant.
- If you are in Year 4 or 5 on the tenure track, now is a perfect time to look for post-tenure fellowships. You may be able to add to your tenure sabbatical and get a head start on your post-tenure research. You might also consider teaching fellowships that will give you a break from your institution and allow you to teach courses you may not be able to offer in your department.
- Say no to leadership roles on committees, citing your need to prepare for tenure. However, if possible, be on a committee with tenured professors so you can see what is required of people in leadership roles.
- Decline requests for mentees, especially from other institutions. While your heart is in a good place, now is not the time to guide other people's careers. Get your own solidified first.
- Find senior mentors, in academe and outside it. As you anticipate becoming an associate professor, your sights should be set on the next obstacle: full professorship. That is a rare accomplishment, particularly for women and people of color. You will need guidance from people who've done it to make sure your five-year plan aligns with the requirements of full professorship within your institution and discipline.

Most important, remind yourself of your successes. Reread your publications, print positive course evaluations and keep them in a binder, revisit your third-year-review documents, and note your professional growth. You're an advanced assistant professor, a title that — while not an official designation — means you belong in academe and are ready to take the next step.

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