

That New Hire Needs Your Help

chroniclevitae.com/news/2088-that-new-hire-needs-your-help



August 13, 2018

Image: iStock

By Jane S. Halonen and Dana S. Dunn

Asked to offer advice to new hires in his department, a senior professor replied, "There is no way not to have a first year." Her remark seemed odd, and a bit ominous, but it turned out to be an accurate indicator of the harried life of a first-year faculty member.

For mid- and late-career professors, figuring out how to help new colleagues settle into the department isn't always an easy call. After all, we joined the enterprise in a vastly different era. Many of us were hired to the tenure track directly upon receiving a Ph.D., or shortly after. We started with little practical experience in teaching and with limited scholarship, focused mostly on our dissertations.

Today's new faculty hires are likely to arrive much better prepared, since the tight tenure-track market means they aren't necessarily new to the profession. They may have had supervised teaching opportunities in graduate school and worked several years as contingent instructors. Many of them already have an ambitious scholarly agenda and multiple publications — which is fortunate, since research demands for tenure tend to be much more rigorous now than the ones that were in place for us, their senior counterparts.

Despite those differences, new faculty members still have much to learn from those of us who are more seasoned. Securing a tenure-track job can be exhilarating, but the watchful eye of a department chair is different from that of a graduate adviser. There is no guarantee that their

new supervisor will alert them to common pitfalls (e.g., that doing a course overload for extra income may mean they get little else done that semester) or closely track their research progress so that their tenure prospects remain favorable.

That's where we, as senior professors, come in. Here are some things we must help our new colleagues understand about academic life and culture:

A career in teaching is harder than it looks. New Ph.D.s have endured well over 20 years of watching, and potentially learning from, teachers of all stripes. Very few teachers give any indication of the strains attached to their chosen profession. Even with the preview of academic life that adjunct appointments provide, new full-time faculty members may be surprised by the complexity of their new department's culture and traditions, the characteristics of the specific student population, and the challenge of finding a reasonable work/life balance. The standard duties of the profession — writing lectures, grading, designing active-learning experiences, mastering ed tech — can overwhelm even "experienced" new hires.

Scholarly expectations can feel like tyranny. We all know that completing a Ph.D. is a long and often grueling process. By the time new Ph.D.s find a tenure-track job — if they find one — their interest in their dissertation topic may be exhausted. Although a fresh start sounds like a good idea, such a decision presumes a new research topic being identified, and that ain't necessarily so. Even if new hires already have publications, tenure considerations tend to focus on the scholarship they produce next. So they need to quickly forge a research agenda that makes sense in their new context, and get moving. Learning a new area, even in one's familiar field, can take time. Meanwhile the tenure clock is ticking.

They will need a "service agenda." Most new assistant professors will face some pressure to fulfill the third pillar of obligation that shapes their academic lives: service. The range of service opportunities can be daunting, and most new hires will not know the inside scoop on which committee assignments to court and which to avoid. Ideally, a service assignment is a good match for a faculty member's strengths and values (e.g., a committee to redesign general education may appeal to those with reformer zeal). But committee work can be seductive. Service, no matter how satisfying, will still divert the faculty member from research and teaching that will matter far more at tenure time.

Sometimes the stakes really are low and the politics vicious. President Woodrow Wilson reportedly said that politics in Washington were a snap after surviving Princeton. New hires will need help learning the key players, the members of each faction, and the best ways to remain neutral for as long as possible.

Sundays are ruined. The respite quality of virtually every weekend fades after Sunday breakfast for academics, because the day must be allocated to list-making, coordinating, prepping, and anticipating the demands of the coming week. It's OK to feel happy when external factors, such as a snowstorm or hurricane threat, cancel class.

In short, an assistant professor's first year on the tenure track — with its vastly heightened demands — will be a panoply of emotion: terror, confusion, irritation, exhilaration, and, last but not least, hope.

You and your colleagues wooed these new hires. What can you do to ensure they succeed?

- Make sure they get release time from teaching. Some institutions allow new hires to teach a reduced load, since they may have had only a few months to get course materials and plans together. A limited teaching load (if your department can swing it) allows them to get off to a good start. Alternatively, assistant professors may find it more useful to teach a reduced load toward the end of their probationary period, when they are assembling their tenure materials. Providing some release time for new colleagues signals a level of support that may inspire loyalty.
- Set an example and participate. Most colleges have programs to help faculty members improve their teaching and writing. But new hires may fear there's a stigma attached to participating — they don't want to inadvertently signal some deficiency that could affect the vote on their eventual promotion. If you, as a senior professor, participate in a faculty-development session, you make it acceptable for lesser-ranked folks to do so, too (and you might improve your own teaching and writing in the process). Teaching centers can offer great advice on classroom dynamics, time management, and scholarly productivity, not to mention serving as a place for new folks to meet people from other departments.
- Offer low-stakes feedback on their teaching. Encourage new hires to conduct midsemester course evaluations — something as simple as asking students what's working and what's not — in time to have a positive impact on the formal end-of-semester evaluations that will count later on in the tenure decision. Alternatively, assuming you're a good teacher, offer to informally observe your new colleague's in the classroom, followed by a cup of coffee and a gentle conversation offering suggestions.
- Know your mentoring limitations. Not all senior professors are equal when it comes to mentoring skills. And you can do more harm than good if you feel roped into mentoring someone with whom you have little in common. If your department assigns new hires to a senior mentor, collaborate on the choice and make sure your sensibilities and values support what the new faculty member wishes to accomplish. Encourage a new assistant professor to look for a mentor outside the department if no one inside fits the bill.
- Limit their service duties. New assistant professors should not be exempt from service, as it is a great way to get to know the nature of their new academic culture. However, they shouldn't be saddled with service obligations that are too challenging or too time-consuming. Help newbies learn how to say "no" with minimal political fallout.
- Show them the town. Get brochures from the local Chamber of Commerce to help introduce a new faculty member to life beyond the campus. Share tips on the best festivals, brunch spots, barbers, dry cleaners, day-care centers, and so forth, so that the new person isn't starting from scratch in every practical decision that attends moving to a new place.
- Warn them about Year 2. Once the demands of the first year are over, assistant professors will have a bit of breathing room. They might start reflecting on questions of

fit: Have they landed in a place that is a good match for their values? Can they see an academic life unfolding favorably here? Is academic life meeting their expectations?

Why should you care so much about whether newcomers settle in properly?

From a defensive standpoint, wooing is hard work, and you don't want to lose a promising colleague through unhappiness or inattention. From a more positive standpoint, the level of care extended to its members reflects the character of a department. Ensuring that newcomers have a humane workplace means you do, too.

Jane S. Halonen is a professor of psychology and former dean of arts and sciences at the University of West Florida. Dana S. Dunn is a professor of psychology and chair of the department of psychology at Moravian College.

This article relates to...

More News & Advice

- **Why I'm Easy: On Giving Lots of A's**

August 7, 2018

The importance of encouraging students who are weighed down by preprofessional courses to take a class for — dare I say it? — pleasure.

- **Will My Students Actually Want to Do This Assignment?**

David Gooblar, August 14, 2018

The best way to start motivating students to do well in your course is to ask them what they want out of the class.

Join the Conversation

1 Comment ²

² [Log In](#) or [Sign Up](#) to leave a comment.