

# Get Out of Your Department

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*Image: a pit stop*

As a [new hire](#), once you've worked out [your relationship](#) with your academic department — how to establish your voice in meetings, how to avoid factions, how to keep your head down and get your work done while maintaining a presence in decision-making — it's time to think about where you fit into the rest of the campus.

When I interview faculty job candidates, I always point out that their department will want to own them, and keep them focused on the departmental curriculum and major. As dean, my job is to remind faculty members that outside their department lies a big university that needs them, too. The business of my college and the larger university can only get done if professors take an interest in campus governance and in (with apologies to those who are allergic to corporate language) innovation.

Why? Because the things that get done at the department level — curriculum approval, hiring, assessment, grievances — also have to get done at the university level. Colleges and universities have governance structures in place to do that business, and those structures vary from campus to campus. But they all depend on faculty stepping outside their departments and examining proposals from a whole-campus perspective. How would a proposed change in degree structure in one department affect another department's enrollments? What would a curricular change mean for external accreditation or time to graduation?

**Your role in campus governance.** None of the work you will do on curriculum or policy committees was taught in your graduate programs, and it's a rare mentor who prepares you for how to participate in governance work. It's mostly on-the-job training, and you'll be expected to pick it up quickly.

Likewise with hiring committees. You may have participated in departmental hires but sitting on a campus search committee for a nonfaculty position calls for a different kind of thinking. As a faculty representative on a hiring committee for a new dean, a librarian, or a director of institutional diversity, you will be asked to consider a range of factors. You're there to have input as a faculty member, for sure — in the case of a dean or provost search, you may be called on to represent the social sciences; in the case of an athletic-director search, you may be there to represent the faculty as a whole. Your search committee may or may not have student representation, so you might have to speak for their interests as well.

In all of those searches, your job is to think about the best interests of the institution as a whole, while making sure you give the kind of input that only a faculty member can give. Keep institutional politics in mind: You, as a tenure-track professor, will have more power than most staff members and non-tenure-track instructors. As Spider-Man learned, with great power comes great responsibility. So look out for the needs and interests of staff members and contingent faculty who may not have the contractual protections you have. Get in the habit early of taking a minute to think about the effects of decisions on folks more vulnerable than you. That habit will serve you well for the rest of your career.

**It doesn't have to be a drag.** As you think about what role you would like to play outside your department, ask around and see what looks fun. Think about what you enjoy in your own life. Are you a music fan? Take a look at what your music department offers — what kind of performances, what kind of ensembles? You could get involved in working with student music groups, certainly, as a mentor or adviser, but don't underestimate how meaningful it is for music students and professors to see you in the audience, enjoying what they do. That applies to dancers, artists, actors, and athletes, too.

Faculty who show up to watch students perform or exhibit their work quickly get a very good reputation across the campus as dedicated supporters of the institution. The same goes for visiting speakers and other events as well — showing up means a lot. People notice. And it can be worth it for reasons other than just accumulating social capital.

I once went to a glorious performance of [Kyogen theater](#) (the comic version of Noh) on my campus, by a visiting Japanese troupe. The show was unlike anything I'd ever seen. I found myself so sad that the auditorium was only half full, as I realized that we were watching something to which few Americans would ever have access, even in an age of YouTube. That kind of thing goes on all the time on college and university campuses, yet some faculty members never poke their heads outside the department to notice.

Showing up can be especially important for your students. When dance students see their history professor at their performance, it means a lot to them. If you're white, be sure to show up at events put together by students of color; if you're straight, don't forget about the LGBT events. Even if you're not part of the community at which you think the event is aimed, your presence will strengthen that group of people and show the campus values them.

**Make things happen on your campus.** Maybe you want to do more than just show up. I've seen new faculty members pull folks together from all over the campus to create interdisciplinary minors and faculty-staff-student action groups. I've seen newbies step into advisory roles in multicultural associations, watched them organize off-campus excursions for students, and put together funding to bring speakers to campus.

New people can create new possibilities. Don't underestimate the advantages you have as someone coming in without the "we tried that 15 years ago and it didn't work" mentality.

I'm not advising you to just start organizing events or groups without consulting folks, or purely for the sake of making an impact. What I'm saying is that if you have a commitment or passion that you think you could use to make your university a better place, you should try to find a way to build something, rather than sit on the impulse until you have tenure.

Maybe you're a new faculty member in the health arena. You're impressed by your university's special programs for

pre-law students and wonder why something analogous hasn't been organized for pre-med and other health majors. Talk to the pre-law folks about how they built their program. Ask the other faculty in the health professions whether you could try some new ideas out. Consult your chair and your dean, and gauge how realistic your chances are. Build enthusiasm for your idea amongst your colleagues and students, and then organize an event. No one ever got denied tenure for planning an event that didn't get a big enough audience. If your idea flops, try something else.

It's easy to get absorbed by the teaching and committee work in your department. And trying to fit your research into your semester, especially at a teaching-intensive college or university, can be near impossible. But it's also easy to forget that service and participation in events elsewhere on campus can feed you, rather than drain you. Helping to hire a new administrator can shape the conditions under which you'll be working. Mentoring an athletic team can tap the pleasure of teaching in a different way. Attending a lecture sponsored by another department can earn you the gratitude of colleagues but can also set you thinking in creative new ways.

So, new faculty members: Get outside your department whenever you can. Not because your department is a bad place to be, but because there are lots of other good places to be, as well.