

Key Lessons Gained on the Journey to Becoming a Clinical Professor

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Abstract

Data from the Academy reveal that non-tenure track (NTT) faculty are less likely to advance through academic ranks compared with tenured or tenure-track (T/TT) faculty. Multiple factors likely contribute to this disparity, including insufficient guidance, lack of purpose, and limited access to resources. Although there are various paths to achieve success in academia, it is valuable to learn from those who have navigated the journey before. This Commentary, aimed at new and mid-career NTT faculty, highlights the five key lessons I learned while progressing to the rank of clinical professor. These lessons emphasize the significance of humility and service to others, setting clear goals while advocating for the necessary time to achieve them, working strategically rather than solely working harder, actively contributing to the advancement of the profession, and ensuring work-life balance through time off and flexible work arrangements.

Keywords: Pharmacy, Mentoring, Professional development, Clinical Professor

Introduction

Imagine living in the northeastern United States with a family that enjoys camping and deciding to take a cross-country trip to several national parks in the West. Excitement builds as you anticipate exploring unfamiliar landscapes. When planning, you could choose Plan A: pack the morning of departure, decide on the first park by vote, turn on the GPS, and set off. Alternatively, Plan B involves careful preparation: researching parks in advance (after consulting someone who has made the trip), budgeting, booking campsites, mapping the most efficient route between destinations, and allowing for flexibility when unexpected obstacles arise. While Plan A offers spontaneity, the likelihood of a smooth,

successful trip is lower than with Plan B, which is more efficient and cost-effective.

Despite this clear analogy, faculty often approach their careers more like Plan A—making progress, but without clear direction, purpose, or sufficient resources. According to the 2022–2023 Profile of Pharmacy Faculty, full professors constitute 39% of full-time T/TT pharmacy faculty [1]. In contrast, NTT faculty and faculty at institutions without tenure lines are predominantly in junior and mid-career positions: 41% assistant professors, 30% associate professors, and 14% full professors [1]. This indicates that NTT faculty are advancing through academic ranks at a slower pace than their T/TT peers. One of my professional goals is to support faculty, especially NTT faculty, in achieving their career objectives. Although there are multiple routes to success in academia, learning from those who have navigated the journey can be invaluable. This Commentary discusses the five essential lessons I have learned on my path to becoming a clinical professor, aimed at new and mid-career NTT faculty.

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Results and Discussion

Be humble and serve others

One of the first lessons I internalized—and one that continues to guide my career—is the importance of humility and service. During pharmacy school, I excelled academically and participated actively in student government. However, I faced humbling experiences during the residency match, ultimately being placed at my fourth-choice program rather than my top three preferences. Although initially disappointing, this placement ultimately proved to be the ideal fit, positioning me for a rewarding academic career. Later, as a faculty member, I became the first in my department to achieve the clinical associate rank in a decade and the first to be promoted to clinical professor in over twenty years. Despite this progress, I experienced humility again when I was not the first choice for department chair, even after 15 years of service and seven years as vice-chair/interim chair. Eventually, I attained the department chair role, but these experiences reinforced the importance of serving others and cultivating humility. Investing in colleagues and supporting the team can be highly rewarding. One way to do this is through mentoring, which benefits both mentor and mentee by enhancing effectiveness, productivity, and reducing burnout [2]. Additionally, mentoring can help mentors achieve their own professional goals more efficiently.

Set goals, advocate for time to achieve them, and prepare for detours

Faculty may lack clarity about expectations and the steps required to advance in their careers. Understanding the mission and strategic priorities of the institution, alongside promotion criteria, is essential for establishing meaningful goals. Engaging supervisors ensures that personal goals align with organizational objectives, while seeking guidance from mentors positions faculty for professional growth and fulfillment. Drafting teaching, research, and service statements early in one's career—well before promotion review—provides an opportunity for reflection and helps clarify direction.

Once goals are defined, it is crucial to advocate for the time necessary to accomplish them. In the early 2000s, our school faced challenges regarding NTT faculty advancement, but intentional allocation and monitoring of effort, combined with faculty input during performance reviews and assignment planning, have led to greater success for both faculty and the institution [3]. Faculty should not hesitate to discuss obstacles with

mentors and supervisors, as these individuals are invested in their success.

Careers often take unforeseen turns. For example, during my first faculty interview in 2002, I would not have anticipated eventually becoming department chair. After recognizing that leadership offered the greatest opportunity to leverage my skills and impact, I accepted the vice-chair role in 2012, followed by an interim chair position in 2017. Thanks to early participation in continuous leadership development programs and opportunities to apply leadership principles, I was prepared for these unexpected responsibilities. As my role evolved, I collaborated with the dean to redistribute my effort, ensuring I could balance previous faculty duties with the demands of department leadership. I strongly recommend that new and mid-career faculty identify mentors, pursue ongoing professional development, embrace opportunities outside their comfort zone, and seek assistance when necessary.

Work strategically, not just hard

Expectations for NTT faculty differ across institutions, but generally, they are asked to contribute across all four academic pillars: teaching, research/scholarship, clinical practice, and service. Successfully managing these responsibilities requires working strategically rather than merely exerting effort. This begins with thoughtful allocation of time and energy. For instance, as a junior faculty member, I was assigned to prepare an evidence-based presentation for my practice site's Pharmacy and Therapeutics Committee. I was able to extend this work into a published review article, two survey-based research studies, and a case series. Building collaborative relationships both within the school and externally is also crucial for productivity, particularly in research and scholarship. The most productive collaborations in my department tend to be interdisciplinary, involve faculty with aligned interests, and include both T/TT and NTT members. Additionally, faculty must learn to prioritize tasks effectively. Tools such as the Eisenhower Matrix, which categorizes tasks by importance and urgency, can guide prioritization [4]. Concentrating on tasks that are important, even if not urgent, maximizes impact, supports career advancement, and helps organizations achieve their objectives.

Participate in professional service

New faculty are encouraged to join and actively participate in state and national professional

organizations, as professional service offers multiple benefits. It allows faculty to cultivate essential academic skills, expand their network, engage in leadership opportunities that can raise their national profile, access research funding, and meet requirements for recognition such as Fellow status [5]. Moreover, professional service enhances the visibility of the faculty member's institution and contributes to the broader professional community by advancing organizational initiatives and promoting progress in education, practice, and research. Establishing a professional service plan early in one's career and identifying a "professional home" aligned with personal interests and career goals can set a productive trajectory.

Without such planning, faculty often experience one of two extremes: minimal engagement or overcommitment. For example, between 2016 and 2019, I served simultaneously as chair of the Eastern States Conference for Pharmacy Residents and Preceptors, chair of the AACP Pediatric Pharmacy SIG, and on the board of directors for our state ASHP affiliate. While honored and humbled to be selected for these roles, they allowed me to refine leadership skills, cultivate valuable professional relationships, and make meaningful contributions to the organizations I served. However, overcommitment can hinder success in other academic pillars and limit flexibility when unexpected opportunities arise, as occurred when I was asked to serve as interim department chair in 2017. My recommendation is to actively participate in one, or at most two, professional organizations. Focused involvement enables faculty to balance their academic responsibilities while pursuing recognition that can support career advancement, such as Fellow designation. This may require declining other appealing opportunities (after discussing with a mentor), which is acceptable. Finally, once committed, treat the role as a fiduciary responsibility and follow through diligently, as fulfilling these duties builds credibility and relationships that are critical for future career success.

Prioritize time for yourself

At some point in an academic career, achieving work-life balance becomes a persistent challenge. Anyone who claims to have fully mastered it is likely overstating their success. Although I have presented on this topic multiple times, and some may see me as an expert, my wife would certainly argue otherwise, as maintaining balance remains a constant struggle for me. Work-life balance is highly individualized and can shift throughout one's

career [6]. Despite this, faculty often hesitate to use their paid time off (PTO), saying, "I can't take time off right now; there's too much to do." The reality is there is never a perfect time for vacation, and you will rarely feel less busy than you are now, at least until retirement. Taking regular breaks helps recharge your energy and supports long-term effectiveness. Personally, I have consistently used my PTO while still achieving promotion to clinical professor, so faculty should feel empowered to do the same.

Even as a department chair with an extremely demanding schedule, it is essential to model healthy work-life practices for faculty, staff, and mentees. I schedule both partial personal days and longer vacations. Our institution has also explored alternative work arrangements, such as remote work, which have demonstrated benefits for work-life balance without reducing productivity, allowing me, for example, to draft this article while enjoying a sunny day on my home deck [7].

Conclusion

New and mid-career faculty benefit from learning from those who have already navigated the academic path. While I am only halfway through my career and still have much to learn, the insights shared here are intended to supplement the mentoring faculty receive at their institutions. This Commentary emphasizes five key lessons: cultivating humility and serving others, setting goals and advocating for the time to achieve them, working strategically rather than simply working harder, engaging actively in professional service, and intentionally taking time away from work while exploring alternative work arrangements to support work-life balance. Much like a road trip, an academic career is more about the journey than the destination. Success in pharmacy academia is defined not by titles or awards, but by the impact on students and colleagues, the care provided to patients, and the new knowledge generated through research.

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