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Advice to a New Faculty Member

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Sure, I can understand your concern. You're just starting out at Grand Valley. You'd like to do well, maybe even stay here for the rest of your life. So your question, "What do I have to do, to succeed as a Grand Valley faculty member"—that's a good question.

Perhaps we should start with the big view. You're what—35 years old? So you might well be here for 30 years. What can we say confidently about a 30-year span, except that things are certain to change?

Consider my case. I came to Grand Valley primarily because I wanted to teach at a small liberal-arts college. As you know, most of those colleges are private. Twenty years ago (and still today) their financing was problematic, pay was always a problem, and there was usually severe religious and social parochialism.

So I thought the idea of a state-supported liberal arts college was marvelous. I still remember, the first faculty meeting I attended, there was this huge debate about whether or not Grand Valley should have an Education department. I thought I had died and gone to heaven!

If I had stood up at that faculty meeting and said, "Look, let's plan on 12,000 students, two campuses, a graduate school, a staff with 370 administrators, and a reputation as just another low-level backwater state university," the rest of the faculty would have thought, "We've lost another to hallucinogens—cart him off to the funny farm."

Why am I telling you this? I guess the main point, in thinking about your future, is that as a faculty member you're likely to have little control over the school itself or the demands put upon you. I can tell you what those demands were 20 years ago and generally what they are right now. But halfway through your career? I don't think anyone knows and even fewer care very much at this point.

So perhaps the fundamental bit of advice, if you want to be successful, is to be prepared for change. Don't bother to fight it. And don't bother to promote it either. In my 20 years, I cannot recall a single faculty member who has had any significant effect on the direction the college—oops, university—has taken. The administrators do pay lip service to the importance of faculty—collegiality and all that manure—but basically we're employees. They run the show.

Given that framework, what should you do? Will you permit me another little look back? It'll help illuminate what's expected of you now.

The other thing I remember about that first faculty meeting long ago was that I
was introduced as "a new teacher in the English Department." I can’t imagine that now. In fact you’ll remember that you were introduced last fall as "a new faculty member in the English department."

In fact, in the olden days, we all conceived of ourselves as teachers—almost to the exclusion of any other activities. We lived, were promoted and tenured, and some even retired as teachers. You do a good job teaching, you'd be promoted from assistant to associate professor and later to full professor. In fact, for many, it was a matter of "don't do a bad job of teaching and you'll be promoted." If you approximated the image of a professor—this ideal of the thoughtful, caring, intelligent, reasonably social individual—you could expect to be tenured as well.

I tell you this to help explain the prominence of "teaching" on the published lists of criteria. Officially, teaching continues to be the most important thing, and the administrators as well the faculty will nod solemnly whenever the word is uttered in public. But it’s important for you to recognize that it’s all merely an historic fact, with no current reality. If you make teaching prominent on your list, you're going to be sucking hind tit real fast.

Not that you can ignore it altogether. Unlike many other second-rate universities, you still have to perform minimally as a teacher to succeed. You’d better attend your classes, post office hours, and be around most of the time. Of course, you should always try for "released time" from teaching, but you should accept it sort of regretfully, at least in public.

To put it another way, you still have to be conspicuously a teacher at Grand Valley. But if you want to succeed, your heart of hearts had best attend to other things.

I know this may be hard on you, since we hired you because we thought you were a true teacher. But what can I do—I'm explaining the way things are, not the way they should be.

If not teaching, what?

You’ll remember that the other three categories for judging you are called “scholarship, collegiate service, and community service." It’s been those same categories since the beginning of time, and they’re so clear and sensible that I imagine they'll never change.

It is helpful, however, to understand the true meanings of those terms as they’re interpreted nowadays.

At one time, for example, community service was thought of in traditional noblesse oblige terms—do-gooding for high culture like the Grand Rapids Opera or for approved social causes like the Environmental Action Council or for public service like the Grand Haven school board or zoning council. Carrying the academy to the unwashed public.

But now anything public counts. If you're into tractor-pulling contests, do something official with it—get elected treasurer of the Allendale Tractor Jerks—and list it as your community service. Nobody discriminates anymore, so you needn't concern yourself much with this category. Do whatever you would do anyway, just being sure that you occupy a prominent place on the final report.

A few oldtimers might still object to pornography or trawling, anything that can count against you. They don’t worry much about the council, anyway. At least that’s been true for years.

But exactly which activities were expected of us?

Years back I was on the task force.* For five years we never had any;

But I nonetheless had to answer questions about it regularly—otherwise I’d have to find out about the other activities I looked tight, but there were none.

It was screwy but understandable. The time was very vanguard, we were on favorably. Still today it’s mainly a positive concept.

In contrast, there was community service with its tiresome or embarrassing aspects— you’re already in a lot of groups.

My general theory is that community service gets you the less highly regarded groups.

The person in charge of the way of recognition, whatever it is, done by the department does? The departmental meeting, dealing with students, associates, and Deans about class size and curriculum—best serve the less highly regarded.

Much better to be in the classroom.

In short, my advice is this:

There are lots of considerations to be better rewarded for teaching, which affects education at large.

That brings us to the next thing in the past few years.
I can't imagine that all as "a new faculty member.

Others—almost to the tenured—and some promoted from assistant professors—many, it was a matter of a few years if you approximated that intelligence, reasonably published lists than, and the ad

The published lists ran as a sort of a thing, and the advance word is uttered in form of historic fact, with

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The person in charge of the Freshman Comp program has never gotten squat by way of recognition or reward, but what could be more important to what our department does? I've served twice as chairman of that committee—endless hours meeting, dealing with text books, with adjuncts, with new people, browbeating the Deans about class size. What did it ever get me but a headache, sleepless nights, and an appetite for martinis at 5 o'clock? And the same has been true for my three successors in the last ten years.

Much better to be a computer expert.

In short, my advice is to pick and choose your collegiate service very carefully. There are lots of conspicuous, low-hour committees around, and you'll generally be better rewarded for serving on them than on the hard-core committees that actually affect education at the school.

That brings us to "scholarship" which obviously has become the most important thing in the past few years.
And you can forget all the philosophical and pedagogic notions about scholarship: the word means "publishing" in our department and most others. For the artists it means exhibiting, perhaps.

As for the traditional, broader meaning of scholarship—to include curiosity, investigating, questioning, learning, knowing; with the aim of acquiring wisdom, discretion, prudence, insight, common sense, and fine judgement—you can bag that crap.

At Grand Valley it means publish!

So my advice to you—if you want to stay here, get promoted, get tenured—is publish. When you go home at night, don't think about how you're going to present that George Orwell essay to your freshman class tomorrow; see if you can't mine it for some idea that is publishable. Even if you only print it in the *Grand Valley Review*, it's better than teaching.

And I recommend that you do all those other things related to publishing. Go to conferences and present papers so you can suck up to the people controlling the journals. Get on the editorial boards. You can't beat you-scratch-mine-and-I'll-scratch-yours when it comes to getting your name into scholarly print these days.

If you're wondering, I don't think we're really in the "publish or perish" mode yet, but we're gaining on it. And since many of us older folks are still fighting a rear-guard action, trying to hang on to the teaching notion, you can imagine where the gaining is occurring. It's among the new people, up for tenure, up for promotions: your competition!

I know this is a little disappointing to you—that we advertised ourselves as a teaching place when we hired you. And it is puzzling how this came about, since most of us oldtimers believe it should be a teaching place and find the publish-or-perish idea loathsome and demeaning to the life of the mind.

I suspect it's largely been the consequence of size. When the college was little, you always saw your colleagues teaching and usually did a bit of team-teaching or guesting now and then, so you had a good idea of the quality of everyone's teaching. But when you've got 80 colleagues to evaluate and the only time you see them is in committee meetings or in the lunch room, how are you going to know if they're good?

In the best of situations, it's hard to identify a good teacher or say with much certainty that someone is or is not doing a good job in the classroom. I often wonder about the teachers I know well—those I've studied under. In spite of thinking about it countless times, I'm not even sure which among them I can call good and which not so good. I remember which were memorable, obviously. But which were good—the more you think about it, the fuzzier it gets.

So if you make good teaching a primary requisite for tenure or promotion and then get a committee to decide, you'll probably be mired in fuzzland. Same is true for collegiate service or community activities. But publications? No sweat. They are right there on paper, a nice list, and you can count them up and even judge them A, B, or C—in terms of quality. You could even read them! They're as conspicuous as a BMW.
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