



Five Potential Pitfalls for Junior Faculty at Academic Health Centers

BY R. KEVIN GRIGSBY, DSW

Are you at any early stage in your career? Does the ticking of the tenure and promotion clock seem to get louder with each passing week? Maybe you have started thinking about what you need to do to “climb the ladder” of academic promotion. If this sounds familiar, then this article may be helpful to you.

As a faculty affairs dean, I am responsible for the oversight of the academic appointment, promotion, and tenure process in the College of Medicine at my university. Every year, junior faculty members—those persons who have just received their first academic appointment—join the ranks of our faculty. Typically, this enthusiastic bunch is quickly assimilated into the organization's rank and file without much fanfare.

My position as faculty affairs dean allows me to serve as a “participant observer”; I can observe these individuals as they move through the promotion (and tenure, if applicable) process. Based on what I have learned from my own experience and in observing what happens to others in the promotion process, I have identified some common pitfalls of the junior faculty member. In the worst cases, these pitfalls may account for a failure in the award of tenure. In less dire circumstances, delays in promotion may result.

No one warned me about these pitfalls during my junior years—but someone should have! I hope I can help you by alerting you to the lurking dangers.

The pitfalls are:

- ❖ Too much service effort.
- ❖ Diffusion and confusion.
- ❖ Lack of mentoring or guidance.
- ❖ Exploitation by other faculty members.
- ❖ Lack of discipline and perseverance.

Pitfall 1: Too Much Service Effort

To a newly arriving faculty member, it can feel like quite an honor to be nominated to serve on an important committee. On the

R. Kevin Grigsby, DSW, is Vice Dean for Faculty and Administrative Affairs at Penn State College of Medicine in Hershey, PA. He may be reached at 717-531-3570 or at kgrigsby@psu.edu.

other hand, committee work is likely to require many more hours than you will spend in the actual committee meeting. As an assistant professor, some service effort is important, as you want to demonstrate that you are a “team player” and committed to the department and institutional missions. Too many service obligations can interfere with establishing a trajectory toward the successful award of tenure and/or promotion, particularly for women and minority group members. Junior faculty members who invest a small portion of effort in service until they are awarded tenure or promoted seem to have fewer problems with demonstrating their value to the institution.

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Pitfall 2: Diffusion and Confusion

The early stages of an academic career can be a dizzying experience. Arrival on an unfamiliar campus, a lack of understanding of the campus culture, and a teaching load that far surpasses anything experienced as a teaching assistant (TA) can leave a junior faculty member with both feet planted firmly in the air. Typically, junior faculty members have only a rudimentary understanding of what is expected of them: teaching, research, and everything else. It seems logical that assisting junior faculty members with establishing the foundation upon which to build a career would be a core function of any medical school faculty affairs office. Without guidance of some sort, the typical junior faculty member hasn't a clue as to what is or isn't a priority. Page

Morahan, Jennifer Gold, and Janet Bickel argue that “while a consensus is emerging about the functions of a faculty affairs office, no school has a comprehensive faculty development system.”

The “tyranny of the urgent” sets priorities on a day-to-day basis while a “conspiracy of interruptions” ensures that the junior faculty member delays establishing a clear plan for the future. This is manifested in a promotion dossier that is hit or miss—evidence of trying to do anything and everything simultaneously without any clear focus or target. “I'm working so hard but I am not getting anything done” is a common complaint of the person in this situation. Part of the solution is to establish a clear plan shortly after arrival. Finding a mentor has a number of advantages, not the least of which is helping the junior faculty member to develop a plan for the future. From an institutional perspective, developing a plan

for the future improves the chances that the junior faculty member will build on a firm foundation and achieve success.

Pitfall 3: Lack of Mentoring or Guidance

Mentoring and guidance are important in the development of careers in academic medicine. This appears to be especially true for women and underrepresented minorities, who often have a difficult time identifying mentors. Ideally, institutions should have a system for identifying and linking mentors and protégés. However, it is likely that junior faculty members will need to find mentors on their own. Ideally, mentors assist junior faculty members with moving away from the “tyranny of the urgent” and toward a plan that will support the personal and profes-

sional growth of the junior member. However, the mentor-protégé relationship is complex. Multiple mentors may be needed to span the diversity of job demands where guidance is needed. Junior faculty should understand that no senior faculty member is likely to ask: “May I be your mentor?” In fact, some senior faculty members may approach the junior person with an agenda that is not in the junior faculty member’s best interest.

Pitfall 4: Exploitation by Other Faculty

I wish I could report that all other faculty members are kindly mentors who take pride in assisting their junior colleagues in becoming successful. This may not be the case, however. An invitation to assume the role of co-investigator on a grant can be very flattering and a healthy step in the right direction. On the other hand, being saddled with all of the “grunt work” associated with a project

is far from flattering and is likely to steal valuable time and effort from accomplishing what one needs in order to be successfully promoted and/or tenured. Accepting additional responsibilities always comes at some cost. Therefore, it is wise to be very specific. Draft a Memorandum of Understanding that clearly states your role, your expectations, and the commitment you are making. You should state your understanding of the role of the other party, what you understand as being expected of you, and your understanding of the commitment being made to you. Both parties should initial the document to indicate agreement and each party should retain a copy. The aphorism that “good fences make good neighbors” is very applicable as the document may prevent misunderstanding in the future. The process of constructing a Memorandum of Understanding is valuable in and of itself. It will give you a good “feel” for



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the potential working relationship. In fact, it may lead you to say, “No thanks.”

Pitfall 5: Lack of Discipline and Perseverance

Not exercising discipline and perseverance in the pursuit of extramural funding, improved teaching, and development of manuscripts is the downfall of many bright and energetic junior faculty members. The award of extramural funding is important for two reasons. The first reason is that it pays the bills. The second reason, which is often overlooked, is because it validates your research efforts. In other words, some person or persons (peer reviewers, program officers) think enough of your efforts to provide you with financial support. Junior faculty should not expect success with the first submission of a grant application. Likewise, it is atypical for a new faculty member to receive superior teaching evaluation scores the first time he or she offers a lecture or course. It’s no different concerning the development of a manuscript. It may require several iterations before it is publishable. Don’t give up!

Junior faculty members should develop the discipline to remain focused on a project until success is achieved. Receiving a low priority score or a rejection letter is demoralizing—but it isn’t the end of the world. Learning to use these experiences to produce better scholarship is in the best interest of the individual, the profession, and science. The combination of good mentoring and discipline can be very effective in helping to you move beyond what feels like rejection.

I am certain that other pitfalls exist for junior faculty members. The five pitfalls listed may not be the most daunting. From my perspective, they seem to be the most common. I hope that learning about these pitfalls will help you to avoid them. ❖

Additional Readings

Carr PL, Bickel J, Innui, TS (eds). *Taking Root in a Forest Clearing: A Resource Guide for Medical Faculty*. Boston University School of Medicine and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2003.

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Making the Right Moves: A Practical Guide to Scientific Management for Postdocs and New Faculty. Burroughs Wellcome Fund and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, 2004. Available free for download at www.hhmi.org/labmanagement

Morahan PS, Gold JS, Bickel J. Status of faculty affairs and faculty development offices in U.S. medical schools. *Academic Medicine* 2002;77:398-401.

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