

August 26, 2010

The Chronicle of Higher Education

### **From Graduate Student to Faculty Member**

*By Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong*

**Jenny:** If you're making the transition from the role of graduate student to that of either postdoctoral fellow or faculty member, expect to have a challenging year. You may find yourself at an institution unlike any other where you've studied or worked. You may be asked to teach courses in fields far outside the boundaries of what you're comfortable teaching. You may become overwhelmed by the idea of balancing research and teaching. In addition, you will probably be surprised by how often departmental history that predates your arrival (and may even go back decades) can surface, sometimes complicating your service duties.

**Julie:** No matter how well prepared you are, no matter how much you've taught before, starting a new faculty position will be eye-opening. To get a sense of what most surprises new faculty members, we spoke with four of them.

**Jenny:** René Luis Alvarez, an assistant professor of teacher education at Northeastern Illinois University, had taught in many contexts, including at a high school, before beginning his tenure-track position. His Ph.D. in history prepared him to teach classes about 20th-century American history and Mexican- American history.

Making the transition to teaching in a College of Education, however, meant that he had to familiarize himself quickly with "the latest research and recent literature about how students learn and how teachers teach at the secondary level." Additionally, René had to change the way he taught to serve his students' needs. He told us, "I had become comfortable utilizing traditional methods of instruction, specifically lecture and discussion. Teaching about teaching requires a more direct approach. I find myself guiding students throughout my courses more than I had in my previous experiences. My own instructional methods have become more practical, enabling students to apply concepts immediately rather than compelling them to contemplate some esoteric or abstract idea."

**Julie:** Uzma Rizvi, an assistant professor of critical and visual studies at the Pratt Institute, was surprised to see how different her students at Pratt were from those at the Ivy League institution where she had previously taught. Her Pratt students were more independent. The campus culture was new for her because, she said, students there "have active social, political, creative, and intellectual lives in the City of New York." That makes them exciting to teach, she said, but their demands and expectations were different from those of her previous students.

**Jenny:** Todd Wolfson is an assistant professor of journalism and media studies at Rutgers University. He was pleasantly surprised by the energy and receptiveness of undergraduates at Rutgers, and faced the added challenge of teaching his first doctoral-level seminar. Moving from being an adjunct to his new role as an assistant professor brought a new level of commitment to his teaching. As a member of the faculty, he helps create the communication school's vision for its students, a responsibility that is not part of an adjunct's job. He told us: "Understanding what my department wanted to achieve through different classes led me to think about my teaching differently."

**Julie:** A fourth junior faculty member who teaches at a highly selective institution was happy to talk to us but preferred to remain anonymous. The students he encountered were the opposite of energetic and engaged. He said the most surprising aspect of teaching was the extent to which students needed to be guided in good "studentship," including classroom etiquette, regular practice, and punctuality with assignments. Because the university where he teaches is considered elite, he was caught off guard when so many students didn't know or ignored basic rules of student behavior.

**Jenny:** Both René and Todd said they had been warned that moving their research goals forward would be challenging in their first year. Still, they were surprised by just how challenging that proved to be. Carving out enough time to get anything done was difficult. At the same time, they have both heard from department colleagues that it will be easier to spend more time on research in the second year, particularly because they will have done the prep work for the courses they'll teach.

Uzma and René emphasized the research support they received from their departments. What was particularly helpful for René was that his first-year review required that he develop a research agenda, and that his department and institution are supportive and eager to see him execute that agenda during the next few years.

**Julie:** We also asked the four faculty members about their service experiences. First-year faculty members are often urged to stay away from committee work and devote their nonteaching time to research. Indeed, Todd's colleagues did not push him on committee work and instead expected he would take the first year or two to get situated at the institution. He hadn't expected that and was pleasantly surprised.

René, in contrast, was appointed to a search committee and became a co-chair during its first meeting. The experience taught him a lot about how his institution functions beyond his own day-to-day classroom experience.

**Jenny:** Joining a department means getting to know a lot of new people and how they get along (or not). The junior faculty member who chose to remain anonymous received some good advice on that:  
"The chair of my grad program told me that the best idea was to conduct an ethnography the moment you get into a department. You have to know who the players are and what the issues are. ... At the end of the day, oftentimes the decisions in committee meetings are not personal—they are historically based, and so you have to learn not to take them personally." That advice helped him keep a sense of perspective during faculty meetings.

**Julie:** To all of that advice from our four interviewees, we'd like to add two suggestions. First, talk with other new faculty members periodically in departments across the university. While expectations may vary from department to department, chatting with others who are "learning the ropes" will help you learn as well as think of questions to ask in your department. Second, get yourself a faculty mentor with whom you can discuss how you are doing on teaching, research, and service. A trusted mentor can be a sounding board for questions about departmental expectations and your own progress.

There's no need to do it alone when you're surrounded by colleagues who have been in your position before or are in it now.

*Julie Miller Vick is senior associate director of career services at the University of Pennsylvania, and Jennifer S. Furlong is associate director of New York University's Office of Faculty Resources. They are the authors of "The Academic Job Search Handbook" (University of Pennsylvania Press). If you have questions for the Career Talk columnists, send them to [careertalk@chronicle.com](mailto:careertalk@chronicle.com).*

Copyright 2010. All rights reserved.

<http://chronicle.com/article/From-Graduate-Student-to/124119/>