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Know the Vital Players in Your Career: Your Own Actions

Do good, be good, and let others know you are good.



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By David D. Perlmutter

Too many would-be academics never finish their dissertations, never get tenure-track jobs, or never earn tenure—through no fault of their own—to believe that success in higher education simply requires pulling yourself up by your cognitive bootstraps. That said, you can’t always fault bad luck or lousy advisers. Sometimes your own action, or inaction, is to blame.

I’ve spent the past year writing this series about all of the players who can affect your career: the [department chair,](http://chronicle.com/article/Know-the-Vital-Players-in-Your/141599) the [head of the P&T committee,](http://chronicle.com/article/Know-the-Vital-Players-in-Your/142251)the [faculty factions,](http://chronicle.com/article/Know-the-Vital-Players-in-Your/142887) the [senior campus administrators,](http://chronicle.com/article/Know-the-Vital-Players-in-Your/143477) the [external evaluators,](http://chronicle.com/article/Know-the-Vital-Players-in-Your/144229) the [university P&T committee,](http://chronicle.com/article/Know-the-Vital-Players-in-Your/144913) your [graduate-school or tenure-track peers,](http://chronicle.com/article/Know-the-Vital-Players-in-Your/146697) and, most recently, your own [attitudes and habits of mind](http://chronicle.com/article/Know-the-Vital-Players-in-Your/148291).

Now I want to close this series by making the following case: It’s not enough to know what the other players are up to and to have the right attitudes yourself; you have to do the right things to boost your own odds, whether in graduate school, the job market, the tenure track, or beyond.

**Work—intensely, productively, judiciously.**It’s no great revelation to say that successful academics tend to be industrious. Almost immediately when you get to graduate school you learn how ludicrous is the stereotype of the professor who churns out a few stale lectures a week and spends his summers fishing at a lake cabin. The graduate students and assistant professors I know routinely put in 60-hour weeks.

But hard work is not always productive work. Sure, [intensity of effort](http://chronicle.com/article/Know-the-Vital-Players-in-Your/148291)counts when applied to the right project at the right time. The good news is that intensity can come in stops and starts, and it’s healthier for you if it does, allowing you to set aside work now and then and plug in a bit of life and play.

Get it done, correctly and on time. My professor-father’s seemingly prosaic advice, which I tend to repeat because so many people fail to heed it, is: "Get things done in the correct format, by deadline, and you’ll have a huge competitive edge." Sometimes, like in an Olympic swimming competition, tiny margins can make great differences. I still dolefully recall my involvement with a major, multiuniversity federal grant proposal that got rejected because it was uploaded to the submission website minutespast the midnight deadline. I have seen many other instances in academe—in dissertation research, job applications, and on the tenure track—where small errors made a big difference.

As faculty members we spend a lot of time reviewing other people’s dissertations, manuscripts, articles, and tenure packets. Certainly, we are paying attention primarily to content. But it can sway our verdict to read a poorly copied packet with items missing, confused instructions, or typo-ridden documents. Quality matters, but efficiency and appearance count, too—another seemingly obvious statement that is ignored all too often in academe by people who should know better.

**Learn how to say no.**Probably one of the most frequent pieces of advice given to new faculty members in this column and practically everywhere is: "You have to learn how to turn down projects." That’s just as crucial as learning how to select ones worthy of your time, energy, and intellect.

Saying "no" should be an action, not a [passive reaction.](http://chronicle.com/article/How-to-Say-No-and-Get-Away/45919/) The worst-case scenario is when you are sitting in your office as an assistant professor, testing out your software, when a shadow looms over you. It is the silverback senior faculty member from across the hall who proceeds to jauntily describe a massive research project for which you would be "a perfect partner."

In that scenario, making the wrong decision or a hurried one could prove fatal for your career. What if it really is a great project for which you should make time? Or what if an awkward rebuff ends up alienating someone who will be voting on your promotion and tenure? You need to plan out these scenarios and have Plan Bs available, including an accurate and charted course of what teaching, research, and service you are planning in the years ahead. If you don’t know where you are going, it is easy to stumble onto the wrong path. So don’t just learn how to say no, learn how to say it politely and plausibly.

**Quit when you must.**When you enter graduate school, among the first mental exercises you should go through is to delete from your mind the moral of every sports movie you’ve ever watched. At some point in every one of those movies, a coach lectures a player or the whole team on how they should never quit because the only way to be a winner on the field and in life is to never give up. In the next scene they win the big game.

Maybe that unquestioning belief in self helps morale and performance on the field. But up-and-coming graduate students and assistant professors must not be deluded into thinking that any problem can be overcome, and that any project can be completed, just by throwing hours and sweat against it. Sometimes a theory proves to be rubbish, an experiment leads nowhere, and the best single action you can take is to quit, reboot, and start over—on something else.

This is difficult. Ego and culture demand that we keep forging ahead despite obvious failure. But your productivity and your career depend more on your shrewdness than on your valor.

**Network and publicize.**Find some way—while retaining your dignity and not coming off as a braggart—to convey your achievements to the people who should know. As a dean, I love it, and find it quite useful, when faculty members in our college send me a note about a paper or book they’ve published (or better yet give me a copy). Likewise, if you publish work related to some luminary in your field, it’s not grandstanding to call his or her attention to it, perhaps in the vein of, "I’m following up on your research on X; I’d love to get together at our national conference and discuss it."

In truth, if you’re a faculty member at an institution where research counts heavily, only a few dozen people—not counting provosts and deans—will have a decisive effect on your career because they are the ones who will write outside letters of evaluation. If you have objectively worked hard and achieved the metrics of success, there is nothing wrong with making sure colleagues in your subfield are aware of your happy outcomes. National conferences are one of the best places for that intellectual exchange to happen.

So do good, be good, and let others know you are good.

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<http://chronicle.com/article/Know-the-Vital-Players-in-Your/149629?cid=megamenu>