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**My First Semester on the Tenure Track**

By Javier Jiménez



*Image: Brian Taylor*

On the last day of finals, as I worked through my must-do tasks before winter break began, I realized that I was quite pleased by the progress my students had made [during my first semester](http://chronicle.com/article/Youre-Hired-Great-What/134460) on the tenure track. Not only did I not break them, but their final papers and exams showed tangible examples of learning.

Of course, they were not the only ones engaged in a new educational experience. I, too, was learning: I was learning that time, alas, is not Newtonian but rather a random quantum tapestry of ephemeral plans.

Let me back up.

As a teacher and researcher, I believe in method. And up to this point in life, method has believed in me, too. I learned in my early 20s, during brief stints working in social services, that even the most daunting problems—"Tell me again: How did your house catch on fire the same day you lost your job and were diagnosed with a rare form of cancer?"—can be managed by breaking them down into smaller issues and tasks. You create a plan that deals with each small challenge, progressively working toward the larger goal.

That method informs both my teaching and my research. As long as you state a clear outcome, the steps to reach it can be imagined and plotted out. There is nothing really that can't be done, or at least nothing for which you can't create a plan of action. Sure, as you learn new things along the way, you have to be ready to revise your original route and even modify your goals, but generally speaking this method delivers results. I have years of successful teaching and one Ph.D. as evidence.

But while a graduate program, and many professional and personal situations, usually responds to this rational-choice, cause-and-effect paradigm, the real world of the tenure track, at least for me, has yet to cooperate. The teaching is manageable; the research is manageable; the service is manageable. I might even say that all three together are usually manageable.

But when they all conspire against you, that's when you notice that the space-time continuum doesn't bend quite the way you think it does, no matter how many time-travel episodes of *Star Trek* you've logged.

What do I mean, exactly? At the beginning of the semester, I came up with a color-coded, state-of-the-art, software-driven-and-responsive weekly schedule. Between the neat blocks of time dedicated to every kind of activity I could think of (teaching, grading, reading, doing research, writing, attending meetings, etc.) and the beautiful layout of different colors and shapes, I was confident that my will to control reality was well on its way to success.

Never mind that I forgot to schedule lunch for myself, and that during the first week of the semester I had to "unschedule" exercise. It turns out, anyway, that both activities are spurious, though they do help to explain why poor nutrition and chronic fatigue go hand in hand.

My point is that my method made sense, and thus the universe made sense. That is, until it didn't.

For example, there were days—about three of them—in which I proceeded flawlessly from teaching to not eating lunch to teaching again and then planning my classes for the next day. All of my time-sensitive tasks for that day were completed.

And then, as I would begin working on an article, my computer would remind me to work on revising the Spanish major. Or a student who couldn't attend my regular office hours would show up. Or I'd have to leave my office to attend an open forum with a prospective college provost.

One week, I presented some of my research to the faculty, which was a lovely experience, but preparing for that meant that I had to put off working on a future publication. And then there was the time that I was so caught up in grading that I showed up 15 minutes late to a meeting for new faculty members—a meeting that was definitely scheduled in my beautiful, color-coded calendar.

For the record, I think all of those "distractions" are important. Some, like advising or serving on an academic plagiarism committee, are not just important—they're patently part of the job, and I have no qualms with that. Moreover, working on reshaping our Spanish major with my colleagues is actually enjoyable: Linking what happens in my classroom to the curricular goals of the program, the department, and the college lets me appreciate the role I play in crafting students' educational experiences.

But the tripartite notion of a faculty member's job—teaching, research, and service—is quite misleading. There are multiple variables within each one of those categories that demand a great deal of attention, often in unpredictable ways.

I was not naïve enough to think that the job would be easy. I knew that it would be all-consuming and that I would not fully control my fate. What I wasn't, and couldn't be, fully prepared for was how all the competing interests would so quickly and efficiently drain me of energy.

Despite my best efforts to build in some relaxation, like joining the weekly faculty bowling league, I often had to cancel (see "unscheduling" exercise, above). And those are the activities that normally recharge you. By the time Friday hit, I was operating on sheer will, and Saturdays were spent recovering.

At first glance, it might seem that this pace was unsustainable. It often felt as if it were. But what was really happening was that both my mind and my body were becoming acquainted with a completely new way of living.

In September, I was paying for start-up costs I hadn't planned on, like developing and getting approved a new course for the spring semester, becoming acquainted with a new Spanish textbook, or learning how to get administrative tasks done. But now I'm starting to get some of the initial return on those investments: fine-tuning the new course and not developing another new one from scratch; maximizing the best parts of the new Spanish textbook; or knowing how to navigate the formal and informal procedures for getting things done.

The returns are quite modest, but the most important gain is some space to think about not only the method but the theory I'm crafting for myself of what kind of professor I want to be.

Looking back to the beginning of the semester, it's clear I needed a method. But I also needed to mitigate my expectations of what I could get out of my days and weeks. Without a system, of course, the possibility of madness would have been quite real. As I see it now, the trick seems to be having a plan that is ambitious but not wholly unrealistic, and not beating myself up if things don't work out quite the way I planned them.

The other thing I've learned is that I need to have a theory of myself as a professor to guide my work, just as theory guides our scholarship. The difference between having a plan to shape your day-to-day work versus having a vision with a plan to make that vision tangible seems to be the difference between a job and a career: In the former, you do what is asked of you; in the latter, you do what you ask of yourself.

The bewildering aspects of transitioning from graduate student to professor are only partially related to learning a new job, in a new institution, and in a completely different part of the country. Another part of the puzzle has to do with the fact that you are no longer following the structure—however loose it might have been—of a graduate program.

As much as a dissertation helps you understand your field and your place within that field, the project is ultimately about getting your degree, and your dissertation committee plays a role in curating that experience. As a faculty member, it is up to you to figure out who you are, what you want to be, and how to get there. It's exhilarating and ultimately quite harrowing.

I certainly don't claim to know exactly what kind of a professor I want to be, but I can see some outlines as to what kind of role I want to play in my college and in higher education.

Better yet, I am approaching the coming months and years by actively questioning how I want to do things and why I want to do them. I aim to chart a course through the swirling eddies of faculty commitments and responsibilities rather than be buffeted by the competing and legitimate demands on my time and energy. I hope next semester will be both satisfying for my students and rewarding for me.

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