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AALS Workshop for New Law Teachers
Reports from New Law Teachers
Saturday, June 26, 2004

Top Ten Tips for New Law Teachers

(1) Celebrate. Welcome to one of the best jobs in the world.

(2) Plan for your arrival.

- **Take time off to relax and recoup** before starting your new job. The first year of teaching is taxing, and you want to arrive fresh and motivated to ward off burn-out during the year. (Corollary: do not teach summer school unless you are bankrupt.)
- **Plan to arrive early.** Make every attempt to set up your home and office before classes begin.
- **Complete paperwork and other set-up tasks in advance.** Contact your human resources officer about payroll and benefit forms that may be completed prior to your arrival. The information technology office may be able to set up your computer equipment, phone, etc., in advance.

(3) Prepare for classes wisely.

- **Courses:** select a text that is widely used in your field and try to honor its order. There is plenty of time later to develop creativity in the classroom.
- **Seminars:** consider whether it would be best to compile your own materials (this is likely if the seminar is related to graduate studies or work experience). Typically there is wider variance in seminar format, depth, and student assessment than in regular courses. Contact colleagues who routinely teach seminars or are known for successful seminars to gather their input.
- **Keep the syllabus flexible, simple, and direct.** Avoid dates or time lines. Provide topic headings and assignments for the whole term. Clearly define expectations, requirements, methods for assessment, valuation of class participation, and grade calculations.

- **Do not waste time reinventing the wheel or fighting institutional pedagogy.** Ask your colleagues for syllabi. Use your teachers' manual. Survey colleagues about local practices for teaching (length and rigor of reading assignments, methods of student assessment, use of classroom technology and handouts, availability of lecture notes, number of office hours, etc.).
- **Prepare as many lectures as possible prior to the start of the semester.** Always prepare and save lectures in an organized fashion for future use.
- **Use a seating chart and make every attempt to learn the names of your students.** This shows respect for the students and gives you authority in the classroom.
- **Establish credibility early with students.** Be prepared, organized, and accessible as a professor. Dress professionally. Refer to students by their last names.

(4) Jump-start your scholarship.

- **Teach classes that correspond with your research interests.**
- **Develop a research agenda** with article abstracts or outline one article more substantially. This focuses your attention and provides something to share with colleagues who enquire about your research plans. Let the ideas simmer. Few institutions expect new academics to further significantly research projects during their first year of teaching.
- **Finish an article the summer following your first year of teaching.**

(5) Arrive in style.

- **Create inviting work spaces in home and office.**
- **Be a presence at the law school.** Participate in welcome events, get to know your colleagues and staff, and learn law school procedures and policies (ask for a faculty handbook!).
- **Learn about the broader institution: its resources, related departments, etc.** This is especially important if you hold a courtesy appointment in another part of the university.

(6) Choose mentors.

- **Informally choose two or three mentors at your school.** It is important that at least one be senior and one junior. Your senior colleague will help you clarify institutional expectations

and guard your time. A junior colleague (or recently tenured colleague) will likely be someone with whom you may more frankly discuss institutional politics and who will have more recent experience with faculty review processes.

- **Identify contacts at other law schools** with whom you may communicate about pedagogy, draft articles, and the academic experience in general. These individuals are isolated from the politics of your institution and may provide valuable external perspectives on faculty dynamics, teaching, and scholarship.

(7) Learn the politics of your institution.

- **Follow the lead of similarly situated colleagues.** Some faculties expect junior colleagues to be more vocal than others in faculty meetings.
- **Pick your battles.** When in doubt about the effects of your position on faculty relations or overall outcome, be Switzerland, even if lobbied.
- **Always be collegial.** Never speak disparagingly of a colleague. (Students may prompt you to do so.)
- **Be a team player.**
- **Learn when to self-promote.**

(8) Guard your time.

- **Learn to say “no” to opportunities that would interfere with your teaching or scholarship.** It takes time to realize to whom and what you may say “no” without political ramifications, but this is a skill you must acquire.
- **Formally manage your time** according to posted office hours (try not to deviate), a calendar, etc. Schedule blocks of research and writing time.
- **Overestimate class participation time.** Never place yourself in a position where you do not have time to prepare adequately for a class. Reserve an hour before class to review your notes and collect your thoughts.
- **Follow local custom with regard to student supervisees.** Do not agree to supervise more journal notes or independent research projects than is customary. Determine local practice before students start seeking your supervision.

(9) Continually assess your teaching.

- **Give students an informal, mid-term evaluation.** Ask them to anonymously discuss what they like and dislike about the course.
- **Monitor the pace of the course.** Casually solicit feedback during office hours about whether students are responding well to the pace of the course.
- **Ask to observe colleagues** who are recognized for outstanding teaching and invite them into your courses to give you feedback.
- **Make notes** about what material or techniques were successful or unsuccessful. A summary of the material covered the day before adds clarity to lectures. Students also respond well to working through practice problems in class.

(10) Start a tenure file (also for use during annual reviews).

- **Obtain as clear of a statement as possible** from the dean about tenure expectations (number of publications, journal placement, form of community service, etc.).
- **Log hours** spent in committee meetings, participating in community outreach, etc.
- **Continually update your resume** with speaking engagements; newspaper, television, and radio appearances; university and broader community service activities, etc.
- **Save copies** of informal and formal teaching evaluations, publications and acceptance offers, committee contributions, etc.

Sources for more information:

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