



Adventures of a First-Year Faculty Member

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I started the first week at my new university in a very unconventional, yet symbolic way, by crawling through an access panel in the basement of the building where my office is located. Little did I know that I would often be wading through uncharted territory as I navigated my first year at Bellarmine University, a Catholic liberal arts school in Louisville, Kentucky. When I started on the tenure-track last fall, I heard through the rumor mill that “bedrock was exposed in the basement” and I couldn’t pass up the possibility of having an outcrop inside my own building for teaching purposes. Despite my efforts to be discreet in crawling through the wall (is that possible?) I attracted a few curious on-lookers and likely developed a reputation as the eccentric newbie.

I was hired to offer geology classes and develop a geoscience program, an uncommon proposition in these uncertain economic times. Bellarmine is a relatively young university, founded in 1950. It is currently expanding, with plans to more than triple student enrollment (from 2,500 to 8,000 students) and double campus facilities by 2020. I teach three classes each semester: geology for education majors, geology for non-majors and an evolution versus creationism freshman seminar, the latter of which will be replaced with a paleontology elective for biology majors in the spring.

As I am preparing syllabi for my fall classes, I can’t help but reflect back to how I felt just one year ago as I started my first year of teaching full-time. I hope that this commentary is a useful portrait of what to expect for other paleontologists who will be starting their first year on the tenure-track.

Cashing in Favors, Teaching, and Networking

One of the most important lessons I learned was to not be shy about asking for favors and help from colleagues both at Bellarmine and in the paleontological and geological communities. Since I am the first geologist on the faculty at Bellarmine, the primary task I had on my hands was to develop courses from scratch, including lab assignments involving rock, mineral and fossil specimens. I had some curricula to draw upon from classes I taught at the University of Cincinnati as a graduate student, but I found myself calling colleagues at other small institutions to discuss pedagogical strategies and trade course materials over email. I also drew ideas from the *Journal of Geoscience Education* (a must-have journal for anyone with a substantial teaching responsibility) and discovered the amazing “On the Cutting Edge: Professional Development for Geoscience Faculty” website through the National Association of Geoscience Teachers (<http://serc.carleton.edu/NAGTWorkshops/about.html>) which contains material intended to enhance the teaching of geosciences at the collegiate level. In fact, I recently participated in one of their intensive five-day teaching workshops (Teaching Paleontology in the 21st Century <http://serc.carleton.edu/NAGTWorkshops/paleo/index.html>) which proved to be invaluable for guiding my thinking with the development of the paleontology course I will be offering this spring. The paleontologists in attendance at this workshop were a unique blend of faculty at research institutions, community colleges, small liberal arts colleges, and everything in between. I was able to interact with colleagues in a wholly different con-

entifically literate citizen is important for our society and our world. I think that paleontology is an excellent vehicle for clearly articulating these ideas and I believe it is my responsibility to use my understanding of evolution to illuminate how science works.

The Tenure-Track Process

An area of academia that I had no experience with as a graduate student was navigating the tenure-track process. Bellarmine currently has a tenure process that is on a 2, 4 and 6 year review cycle. The tenure portfolios are submitted at the beginning of the year in question, which required me to assemble a 2-year portfolio this summer, at the end of my first year. Bellarmine requires a balance of teaching, scholarship and service requirements, with emphasis placed on teaching first and scholarship second. Assembling a tenure portfolio was time consuming, and I am very much looking forward to next summer when I will not be required to update the portfolio and I can instead focus on research.

When I first started assembling materials for the portfolio, I must admit that I was somewhat intimidated, but my colleagues at Bellarmine were extremely helpful in laying guidelines and conducting workshops where I could ask questions and request feedback. The process of writing the portfolio was useful as a reflective tool where I could identify my strengths and weaknesses and set professional goals for myself in a formalized manner. Having just submitted the portfolio (one week ago today as I write this!) the best advice I can give is to try to be as organized as possible throughout the year. I kept a binder and an email folder where I placed teaching evaluations, copies of syllabi, grade distributions, and other official documents that would eventually find their way into the portfolio.

Balancing Teaching and Research

By far, the greatest challenge this year was determining how to balance my teaching load with my desire to conduct research. Admittedly, I still have not quite figured out how to make the transition between graduate school research ambitions and having a job with a relatively demanding teaching component. My main problem has been trying (and largely failing) to secure large blocks of time in which to conduct analyses and write. I still sometimes feel like a graduate student, experiencing guilt when I think I am not spending enough time

on research and not managing my time effectively. I am currently attempting to retrain myself to work in smaller chunks of time between classes and in the late afternoon, though old graduate school habits (e.g., working at coffee shops at odd hours when the fancy strikes) are hard to break.

During the course of the year I was able to do some research, managing to present a talk at the Geological Society of America Meeting, but also decided to attend a meeting (North American Paleontological Convention 2009) without presenting research for the first time since 2004. Although expensive, I learned that attending a conference without presenting can be a very positive experience. I came away from NAPC feeling renewed, connected, and motivated. I had many excellent conversations with other paleontologists who gave me advice on how to stay in the research game.

I had grandiose plans to pound out analyses and write papers over the summer, but found that I made a few tactical errors and over-scheduled. I was able to secure an in-house research grant from Bellarmine and decided to conduct field work for a new project. The field work was successful and I am excited about the potential of this new work, but realized too late that I should have finished up old projects before committing large portions of the summer toward new data collection. I have a nearly-finished manuscript I have been sitting on since starting at Bellarmine that requires a few solid weeks of analyses and writing before it can be submitted. Starting a new project has blown the momentum on the old project out the window.

This year I found new ways to accomplish research goals that were not available to me in graduate school. I was fortunate to recruit an undergraduate biology student who helped me collect bulk samples, conduct abundance counts and enter data this summer for the new project I mentioned above. She and I will be working on analyses throughout this year and next as she develops her own research project. Now that I am in an advisory role, I find myself becoming more organized and efficient. Having a research student gives me a new sense of purpose, where I can help to inspire and shape a future career while enriching my own. I am hopeful that I will learn from my scheduling mistakes of this year and be able to use the fieldwork I completed this summer to launch a research program over the coming months.

Despite my frustrations with mismanaged priorities, my summer has been greatly productive, but not in ways I would have anticipated. Putting together my tenure portfolio ate up a large chunk of

time, as has preparation and participation in the paleontology teaching workshop. These experiences are obviously valuable, but do not contribute towards getting a paper submitted. I need to make a concerted effort in the upcoming academic year to be more selfish with my professional time. This is not to say that I will not volunteer my time on and off campus, but rather, keep Fridays (when I do not teach) completely uncommitted so that I can work off campus in a coffee shop, strictly on research tasks. I also need to keep next summer as open as possible (with some fun travel thrown in for good measure, of course!).

Final Thoughts

As it turns out, the outcrop behind the wall in my building was not of teaching quality (it was sadly covered with a thick layer of dust, soil and in some places antiquated lab equipment), but I am happy to be forging my own path in creating a geoscience program from scratch where paleontology will have a stronghold. I feel incredibly fortunate

and lucky to have found employment on the tenure-track at a place that suits my personality and career goals. I am continually presented with challenges as a faculty member that I never would have anticipated. I have had no choice but to become adaptable to new stresses and demands on my time that are wholly different from that of a graduate student. I am sure that the year ahead will be just as challenging as the first as I become more invested in the university community, but I am now better prepared and have learned to embrace it as a labor of love.

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