



**How to Help  
New Faculty Settle in:**  
Common Problems and  
Alternative Solutions

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for Administrative Leaders at the University  
of Michigan.*

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# How to Help New Faculty Settle in: Common Problems and Alternative Solutions

During the academic years 2005–12, the director of the UM ADVANCE Program, Professor Abigail Stewart, has met with many newly-hired women faculty, at all ranks, from the science and engineering fields. These faculty members were affiliated with the College of Engineering, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, Medical School, and the smaller schools that have scientists on the faculty. Although many of these faculty members recounted positive experiences, issues that potentially could have been avoided were raised. These problems increased difficulties in adjusting to their new professional environment and even resulted in attrition. Over the years, some of these issues appeared to be recurrent problems and do not pertain only to the fields of science and engineering.

Based on these conversations, the list below identifies some common difficulties; in italics we suggest alternative approaches. In most cases, these approaches were actually offered by other new faculty members who had also directly experienced the issues. Some of the problems (e.g., associated with setting up a lab) are specific to faculty depending on their research needs; others (e.g., relating to teaching; dependent care organization) are much more general. We offer this list in the hope that it will assist departmental chairs, mentors, and new faculty themselves to anticipate and respond to issues that might arise early in their appointment at UM.

## **Access to Mentors**

Some new faculty report that although there is a formal mentoring program in their department, they have not found it easy to access advice or help. Others report that there is not a formal mentoring program and they too do not find it easy to access advice or help.

*Consider providing all new faculty with ADVANCE's handbook (available online at the ADVANCE website or in hard copy from the ADVANCE program) on "Giving and Getting Career Advice," which provides faculty with suggestions about strategies for getting their needs for advice met. If your department or school does not have a formal mentoring program, consider implementing one. Finally, many junior faculty find peer mentoring groups very helpful in addressing their needs for both advice and collegueship. Consider facilitating the establishment of a peer mentoring group (outlined in the ADVANCE Handbook) in your unit or jointly with other related units.*

### **Course Assignments**

New assistant professors have raised the issue of having been assigned to teach courses in areas they do not know well and do not feel equipped to teach. New assistant professors do not know what the norms are about resisting or refusing teaching assignments. Since the tenure probationary period is so short, it is potentially devastating to a faculty member's workload to manage extensive preparation for a course for which s/he is unprepared, quite apart from the added anxiety. In addition to the extra preparation time, there is an additional likelihood that the course will be less well-received and therefore become a barrier to demonstrating teaching competence.

*New faculty teaching assignments can and should be made in the best interest of the new faculty member, and it should be made clear that the new faculty member plays an important role in this decision-making process.*

### **Classroom Authority and Teaching Evaluations**

Many new faculty are not aware of the resources provided by the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT), and do not understand the need to address teaching issues as early as possible. For all new faculty, difficulties in the classroom can result in anxiety, lower teaching evaluations, over-preparing for class sessions, and little pleasure in teaching. Women and underrepresented minority faculty are challenged by students in the classroom more often than other faculty. Because new faculty have

little and sometimes no teaching experience, they are not prepared to address the derailing effects of these persistent challenges.

*Chairs or their designates could meet with new faculty early in the first term of teaching, to discuss in an open-ended and non-evaluative way some of the difficulties many new faculty have, and the resources available to address them. New faculty can be provided access to a senior faculty member who takes more than a pro forma interest in understanding the teaching experiences of new faculty members and who might be able to provide advice and/or assistance.*

### **Child Care and Education Needs for Dependents**

Newly arrived faculty need to identify child care options without much, if any, knowledge of the Ann Arbor community. In some instances, this leads to unsatisfactory child care arrangements, requiring time, energy, and resources to correct. Faculty with special needs children must identify specific education options which requires additional time, energy, and resources. This situation contributes to great anxiety and to expenditure of substantial time.

*At a minimum it is important to be sure the faculty member is aware of on-campus resources like the child care resource office and the family-friendly policies.*

*In addition, this set of concerns is often experienced as “extra,” something quite outside the official life of the university and therefore off limits for discussion with senior colleagues. This perception is isolating and detrimental since senior colleagues often have information or advice that would be helpful. In addition, the opportunity to openly discuss an important, distracting, and time-consuming issue may, in itself, help an individual feel more “at home.” Facilitating open discussion of the issue with senior colleagues in any department is important.*

### **Dual Career**

Some faculty members arrive in the summer to get an early start on setting up their lab, and often face a situation in which they are

waiting for equipment and/or renovation for much of the summer. This common situation quickly becomes very stressful if they have a partner who has not found local employment. They are often covering the cost for two households, possibly before their UM salary has begun. In addition to the anxiety of this situation, there is also real financial hardship.

*When faculty with dual career expectations arrive on campus with these needs unaddressed, the situation may persist. Ignoring the situation does not make it disappear. The chronic situation can mean that a partner who has joined the faculty member is unemployed and unhappy, or has actually remained at the previous household. Both circumstances create significant complications. Maintaining two households on an assistant professor salary is difficult, especially when travel to partner and children is also needed. Lack of attention to these situations strands a new faculty member in a stressful situation with few supports.*

*Make early and active use of the dual career program services. In addition, regular inquiry into the situation can surface problems that can be addressed. At a minimum, unavoidable protracted separations can be supported with some discretionary travel funds.*

### **Loneliness and Isolation**

New faculty who arrive without any partner or family may experience a protracted period of substantial isolation and loneliness. This can compound isolation for those faculty different from most faculty in their department in other ways (e.g., gender, race or ethnicity, country of origin, sexuality). This experience can definitely affect their productivity and integration into a social network and community. Some faculty who have busy lives of their own simply assume that these issues are not important to know about or address; as a result, new faculty members' isolation and loneliness can persist for a long period.

*Be sure you are aware of the presence or absence of others making the move with new faculty, and inquire regularly into their integration. Identify people for them to meet, provide information*

*about University resources, and facilitate connections. ADVANCE staff are always happy to work with faculty on these issues.*

### **Departmental Environment**

Some new faculty report that some department members try to immediately bring them into longstanding, ongoing senior faculty tensions or conflicts. Newcomers are always uncomfortable about these efforts, because they recognize that their own best interest cannot be served by getting involved with interpersonal conflicts that did not involve them. But they worry about how to address these pressures without offending potentially powerful senior colleagues who are new to them.

*Consider discussing with senior faculty the value of avoiding perpetuating longstanding conflicts in this way. In any case try to be sure that new faculty have people to talk with (mentors, departmental chair, more experienced colleagues) who can advise them about how to handle this sort of pressure, without seeming like just another such pressure!*

### **Environment for Women and/or Minorities**

Some white women and minority faculty members had heard negative stories about the climate for women and/or minorities in their department. Once they arrived and began to experience negative situations, they felt that their new experiences fit into the pattern recounted in received stories. This may create serious anxiety about their future here and a rapid decision to go back on the job market.

*Ideally, the negative climate issues should be addressed. At the very least, it is important for chairs and other senior faculty to be aware of the situations that are occurring; this is more likely if they maintain frequent sympathetic contact with new faculty, overtly inquiring into their experience and taking direct steps to intervene with faculty members creating a negative climate.*

### **Writing**

Academic writing can be a difficult and lonely process. Junior faculty members must have regular feedback on their drafts from



colleagues in their fields. It helps them not only develop and reorganize their thoughts, but also establish a productive and realistic writing schedule. At the same time, they are often reluctant to seek out feedback from busy senior colleagues.

*Be sure your senior faculty are aware of the obstacles to seeking and getting feedback junior faculty face. Encourage them to be quickly responsive and attentive to requests. If not already underway, consider the possibility that voluntary writing groups—organized by particular interests, rank, or other means—might help. Circulate information about writing and publishing workshops offered through the University, as well as the assistance offered by Rebecca Sestili, Author-Publisher Liaison for UM Faculty, 734 647-9824, rsestili@umich.edu*

### **Collaboration**

Newly arrived faculty often struggle with making productive connections with collaborators. The new assistant professors are sometimes assigned to senior faculty who actually act as “gatekeepers,” preventing connections, or who do not actively assist in creating connections. There is a pervasive sense among the junior faculty that their senior colleagues are too busy to assist with the interventions necessary for helping them launch successful collaborations.

*Choose faculty career advisors carefully; ensure that faculty career advisors understand that they are expected actually to take concrete steps to facilitate networks and collaborations. Seek feedback from new faculty within the first semester about whether this is happening and step in to create these connections other ways if it is not.*

### **Start-ups**

Once on campus, some faculty members learn that they received a lesser start-up package than colleagues they view as quite comparable to them (that is, at the same rank, with similar research needs, etc. Most faculty fully understand that there is variation in start-ups due to different kinds of equipment, space, and renovation needs; these kinds of differences are not at issue.)

This sense of disparate treatment becomes more critical and anxiety-provoking when they feel they have not received some element in their package (e.g., support for graduate students, summer salary, etc.) that others have and that they feel is necessary for their success.

*Avoid these disparities. Assume that the details of start-ups will be public knowledge and that, therefore, all new faculty at comparable career stages with comparable needs should be brought in on comparable terms.*

### **Establishing a Lab**

Faculty experience significant delays in receiving necessary lab equipment and setting up a fully functioning lab. The following three scenarios appear to be most prevalent: they have insufficient information about procedures and university practices; they have difficulties with vendors who are unhelpful; their arrival has not been sufficiently anticipated. When they come to campus at their own expense in the summer before they are starting, often without their families, it is particularly distressing to be faced with serious delays in setting up a lab.

*Since most new assistant professors have no experience setting up a lab, it is important for this process to be as supported and transparent as possible both before they arrive and once they are on campus. Key support staff and a knowledgeable and sympathetic senior faculty member assigned to be helpful can make this process go much more smoothly. When serious delays are unavoidable, seek ways to minimize the impact on the new faculty member's research program (e.g., by setting up arrangements for sharing, supporting them spending time in collaborators' labs elsewhere during this period, etc.). Encourage new faculty to participate in the annual campus-wide workshop on running a research group.*

### **Lack of System for Assigning or Identifying Students to Collaborate / Work in Lab**

In several instances, new assistant professors have taken on students who were known in the department to be problematic.

In some (but not all) instances, the junior faculty have been advised by senior faculty not to accept these students. The junior faculty members must balance this advice against their growing anxiety about identifying student help.

*It is important to develop a strategy for identifying students to work with new faculty that provides less risk to the new faculty member; if hired early enough they may participate in graduate recruitment and identify a new student; alternatively, they may take joint responsibility for a more advanced student along with a mentor who will provide advice and help with already-identified difficulties. Finally, temporary arrangements may be set up at the department's (not the new faculty member's) expense, and these arrangements can be explicitly identified as having no long-term implications. Conversations with more advanced faculty suggest that these poor initial decisions often end up wasting vast amounts of time during the tenure probationary period, when faculty have little time to waste.*

### **On-line Resources**

ADVANCE Program: <http://sitemaker.umich.edu/advance>

Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT)

<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/>

Office of the Provost: Dual Career Program

[http://www.provost.umich.edu/programs/dual\\_career/index.html](http://www.provost.umich.edu/programs/dual_career/index.html)

Office of the Provost: Family Friendly Policies, Programs, Services, and Benefits: <http://www.provost.umich.edu/faculty/family/index.html>

Work/Life Resource Center: Child Care Resources

<http://hr.umich.edu/worklife/childcare/index.php>

### **Additional Resources**

Barker, K. (2005). *At the Bench: A Laboratory Navigator*. New York: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press.

Barker, K. (2002). *At the Helm: A Laboratory Navigator*. New York: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press.

*Making the Right Moves; A Practical Guide to Scientific Management for Postdocs and New Faculty*, (2006). The Howard Hughes Medical Institute and Burroughs Wellcome Fund (This document can be downloaded from the University of Michigan Library on-line resources.)