

ADVICE

4 Ways to Have More Fun as a Faculty Member



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If you asked faculty members to list the perks of the profession, most of us would say the flexibility to control our own schedules and the autonomy to

follow our intellectual and creative

passions. We cherish our independence. Yet

when we meet up in hallways, more often than not we're all griping about our work — how busy, overbooked, and overwhelmed we are.

Something doesn't add up, right? Sure, there are days when griping is perfectly rational. It can be cathartic. But indulging in too much of it is a bad place to get stuck. And a lot of us are stuck there.

A faculty career — for those lucky enough to have one on the tenure track — is long and full of highs and lows, twists and turns. As two midcareer academics, we asked ourselves: Could we bottle the griping, and start to enjoy not just the good but the bad and the ugly, too?

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And so was born "the 80-percent-fun" goal — we try to have fun during 80 percent of a workday. We knew that wasn't going to just happen. We needed strategies to help us: (a) approach work with a new perspective; (b) organize our time to make space for renewal, creativity, and risk; and (c) cluster the "yuck work" to keep it from eating away at our everyday well-being and productivity.

Ultimately, the 80-percent-fun goal is a reminder to take control of the flexible, autonomous parts of faculty work. We don't meet the goal every day, but here are four strategies that sometimes work:

Strategy No. 1: Learn to Say No (Gracefully)

Making space for fun at work means sometimes you have to say no to things that sound exciting, seem important, and make you wonder, "If I turn this down, will I miss a career-building opportunity?"

For an academic, saying no can be difficult for lots of reasons: You worry how it will be perceived and whether it will have negative ramifications. You are a pleaser and do not want to let anyone down. You fear you won't be asked again. You are tired, and saying yes seems like the path of least resistance.

These tactics have helped us to say no and meet our 80-percent-fun target:

- Develop criteria to decide whether or not to accept a new work commitment. Include questions like: Is this what I need to do to get tenure? Does it energize me? Can I contribute meaningfully? A rule-based approach can take the guilt out of saying no.
- Stall for time unless your immediate reaction to a work-related request is "Hell, yes!" Ask to think it over. It's better not to respond rashly, without thinking through the pros and cons of an opportunity. Sometimes, while you're mulling it over, the person who asked you finds someone else to do it anyway.
- Mostly say yes to service work that will help you grow professionally. All full-time faculty members should do service and contribute to a positive work culture. If you are just starting your career, you could be in the department for a while. Try to contribute to processes and decisions that will shape your future workplace and help you understand the way things work around you. Pick something you like to do, and keep the time commitment reasonable.

- Institutions typically assign a work ratio for research, teaching, and service. Find out what the numbers are on your campus — such as 40 percent research, 40 percent teaching, and 20 percent service — and then use them as a kind of guide for allocating your time, especially early in your career.
- Don't get stuck in the trap of feeling that your tenure or promotion is tied to how nice or accommodating people think you are. Academics do value collegiality: In some cases, people are denied tenure when they don't contribute to their department. But if you are a great researcher at a research-oriented university, or a great teacher at a teaching-based college, odds are you will get tenure based on your merit, not your collegiality. The likability factor is particularly problematic for women, as many of us have been acculturated to be pleasant. Sure, if you have pissed off the entire department, your colleagues won't be generous during the tenure process. But the fact is: Plenty of jerks who are really good researchers or teachers get tenure. Ideally, you set boundaries and try to avoid be perceived as a jerk — but "nice" isn't a criterion for any tenure-and-promotion guideline we've ever read.
- If you really need to get out of doing something but aren't in a position to say no, get a senior colleague to do it for you. As head of a department or program, we sometimes say no on behalf of junior scholars. For example, if a senior professor asks you to help organize a conference panel or edit a volume that is tangential to your work — and it quickly becomes clear you are going to be stuck doing the bulk of the work — ask a mentor or a trusted colleague to intervene. Your mentor can write a note advising you against the idea on the basis of tenure criteria. You can then forward it to your well-meaning prospective collaborator.
- Practice saying no. It gets easier. It's always helpful to have a graceful "no" ready. For example, be prepared to list other work that you have already said yes to. And don't beat yourself up if you realize you said yes to something

you should have said no to, or no to something you should have accepted.
What's done is done.

Strategy No. 2: Schedule the "Yuck" Work

If you are aiming for 80-percent fun, you gotta plan for the 20-percent crap. One strategy: Assign a half-day or an entire day to all the stuff you hate doing — paperwork, travel claims, assessment — and finish as much of it as possible during those hours.

We close our office doors and go into robot mode, crossing one small, annoying job after another off our lists. This feels amazing. With the yuck work clustered, our schedules become more available for creative work. It's like cleaning the house to clear the mind.

Another type of work we assign to yuck days are the tasks we feel anxious about. Some academics work best with a deadline. Others, including us, work best with minimal anxiety. Jobs that make us anxious are those that involve tricky decisions, difficult people, awkward revise/resubmits, or complex funding problems. If we look at our lists and something makes us anxious, we move that task to the top. By getting it done first on our yuck days, we reduce our anxiety and move back toward equilibrium and efficiency.

To maximize fun on the job, here are other tools for dealing with your most irritating tasks:

- Reward yourself for progress. Set a number of annoying tasks and, once you have done them, reward yourself with a short walk to get a great cup of coffee or tea.
- Do the crap work in a pleasing setting. Or distract yourself from the abhorrence of a task with fun tools — technology you enjoy using or really cool stationery, sticky notes, or pens. Of course lovely stationary will not

help you resolve a complex problem but, for us, there is something about a pretty piece of paper that makes crappy work a little less crappy.

- Go back to good-old-fashioned handwritten lists. There is something so satisfying about actually crossing things off a list there next to your computer screen. If you finish something that wasn't on your list, add it — just for the joy of crossing it off.
- Take a moment to notice how much you've accomplished, rather than focus on how much is left to do.
- Remind yourself that some amount of crap work is part of your job. Tedious or dreaded tasks might not seem like "real" work. But they are. Every job involves some degree of dull, irritating, yet necessary work.

Strategy No. 3: Learn to Juggle

Remember the days when you had consecutive hours to work on a research project? That was likely a while ago for many faculty members. As you transition from graduate school to a teaching job, your schedule fills up with student consultations, meetings, teaching, and service.

As you move up the faculty ranks, you will be expected to do more and more service, while your research and teaching loads won't have lessened. Throw a family into the mix, and all of these balls you've got in the air just get harder and harder to juggle. Oh, yeah, and maybe you've already realized that you need exercise and some time to yourself.

Learning to handle the constant juggling is a big part of reaching an 80-percent-fun goal. Our plates are always full — those moments when we feel that we have things figured out are few and far between. Instead of thinking we have to reach some state of perfect balance, we have come to accept that juggling, rearranging, and prioritizing are a daily, even hourly, part of faculty work.

We are still working to improve our juggling, but here are some ideas to get you

going on your act.

- A lot of research shows that multitasking hurts your brain. Multitaskers make more mistakes and retain less information, and multitasking all the time is exhausting. To minimize it, learn to quickly transition between tasks. Focus on one thing, then put it aside and concentrate on something else. Try to avoid social media and other distractions. When we are transitioning at work between email and writing, or between administrative tasks and research, we find it helpful to put something in between that allows us to move around. Check in with a colleague or staff member on an issue that requires a conversation to resolve. Take a walk around campus and see what trees and flowers are blooming. Go to the library and wander the stacks. Get an iced tea at the student union. What never works is checking Facebook.
- Learn to be efficient in short bursts of time. That's something both of us found hard to do when we became faculty members. Try to break up tasks to fit your time frame: For example, split a section of a paper into paragraphs you can work on in small bits of time. Planning ahead in that way is a useful skill. If you have only 15 minutes, do a 15-minute job.

Strategy No. 4: Rest

Some semesters just aren't fun. Some projects, people, and committees are just plain hard to deal with. You get worn out. Or sometimes all of your energized effort leads to a sudden collapse. So take a break. Let your brain recharge. Careers are long. It all gets done.

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But when the fun ratio does get out of whack, pause, rest, and take care of yourself. Binge-watch something on Netflix. Plant a garden and talk to your tomatoes. Ride your bike. Hang a bird feeder. Bake cookies. Plan a trip. Read a book for enjoyment rather than for work. Sit on the floor and play with your kids or your pet.

In short: Do whatever makes you happy.

If you can't do that for yourself, think about the good example you will set for the next generation of scholars if you can find fun in your academic work.

All too often, academics remind us of Eeyore from A.A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh stories. Eeyore is always bummed out. In some campus cultures, that is the norm. We often hear graduate students, especially women, express concerns that choosing a faculty career will set them up for years of stress and misery.

It's important to be realistic about the faculty job market, which can cause stress and misery. But as for the work itself? Yes, there are sacrifices. Yes, there is stress. But, on balance, there is also a lot of fun to be had.

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