

Developing Your Intellectual Wheelhouse: A Guide for Young Faculty in a Psychology Department

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The goal of this article is to address relevant issues for students and postdoctoral fellows interested in pursuing a tenure-track position in a psychology department at a Research I institution. This article may also be useful for individuals trying to talk themselves out of pursuing a traditional academic career, in the same way that one day I expect an ex-undegraduate student to come up to me at Starbucks and say, "Thanks for showing me all the reasons why I don't want to go into psychology." As such, I will discuss making the decision to pursue a career in academia, applying for the first position, and successfully developing a career in a research-focused academic setting.

Be Sure That an Academic Job in a Psychology Department Is Right for You

Long before one begins to prepare the first application for an assistant-professor tenure-track position in a psychology department at a Research I institution, several questions must be answered. Indeed, it is not wise to apply for a position without knowing whether it is the right type of job for you. The answer to whether a traditional academic job in a psychology department, or any type of job for that matter, is right for someone really must be determined on a case-by-case basis, considering a host of factors unique to that individual and the opportunities available. As a result, one must be armed with as much information as possible, including being honest about one's own abilities, interests, and goals. The remainder of this discussion will cover what to consider if one decides to pursue a position in a psychology department; however, it is first necessary to discuss considerations if one is unsure about such a career path.

When training in a clinical psychology program, especially one with a clinical science/research focus, there can appear to be

only one right career path. After all, most of your professors chose the academic psychology department route, and often encourage their students to do the same. If this is an appropriate route for you, then you are in luck because you have the benefit of having a wealth of resources at your disposal to help you pursue this goal. However, if a position in a psychology department is not a good match for you, pursuing other options often can come with feelings of guilt and exclusion, not to mention both perceived and real disappointment/disapproval on the part of your mentors. The latter can be especially difficult if you admire particular mentors who are less able to be comfortable with you not pursuing their path.

Lessons From Narcissus and Goldmund

Herman Hesse's novel *Narcissus and Goldmund* chronicles the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development of two adolescents training to be abbots at the Mariabronn Cloister. The boys are separated by a few years of age, with the older boy (Narcissus) seemingly perfectly suited for the disciplined lifestyle of an abbot. At the start of the novel, the younger boy (Goldmund) is beginning his life at the cloister. Upon meeting Narcissus, Goldmund immediately becomes enamored with the older boy and wants to follow in Narcissus' path. Goldmund is a highly charismatic fair-haired boy with many admirable qualities, but is simply not suited for the disciplined life in the cloister. Narcissus tries to discourage Goldmund, not by telling him that this is the wrong life for him, but by telling him that there are other lives better suited for his wonderful qualities and talents. To prove Narcissus wrong, Goldmund devotes himself even more vigorously to the disciplined life. Deep down, however, Goldmund knows that Narcissus is correct and he soon flees from the cloister to pursue his true destiny. Unfortunately, because he

could not come to terms with this choice before he left, he was not able to seek out guidance from those around him, thereby leading to a series of hard lessons. It is not until the end of the book that Goldmund truly realizes that he is not a failure for following his path and not that of his mentor.

Graduate school and one's early professional career can be a time of great pressure to conform to the goals and destiny of one's mentors and peers. However, as illustrated in the Hesse novel, each student should follow the path best suited for him or her. The sad part of the Hesse novel is that Goldmund always felt a significant amount of guilt for the choices he made, despite the fact that Narcissus actually supported his pursuing alternative goals. One can only imagine how much more difficult this might have been had Narcissus not been supportive, which unfortunately can occur when a student does not choose to follow a mentor's path. In the end, however, a relationship with a mentor does not justify 30 years of misery. Further, one would hope that, even in the most extreme cases, mentors eventually realize their folly and come to accept what once seemed like a great loss. As one word of caution, however, this story is not meant to apply to students who mischaracterize their interest in research to gain admittance into a research-focused institution because of its prestige level. Realizing that your path may not be what you once thought and allowing yourself to follow it is qualitatively different than knowing all along what you want to do and misleading others to get you there.

Applying for the First Job

Academic departments take a huge risk when they hire a junior professor. They do not necessarily expect a long track record of success, but they do expect evidence of potential. In this way, it is crucial to show that your talents and accomplishments in graduate school

and internship will translate to an academic setting once you are on your own. The best way to accomplish this goal is to develop a clear and coherent plan and to be able to express this in a clear and coherent manner.

I will offer myself up as a good example of what happens when you do not do this very well. When I applied for academic jobs, I sent out 32 applications. By the time the dust had settled, I had been granted an interview at only 3. My problem was less that I did not have a clear and coherent plan, but more that I did not express it very well and what I did express was not believable because it was not supported by my track record. My situation is somewhat unique because I actually had a reasonably good publication record including over 20 articles primarily published in Tier 1 and Tier 2 journals by the time I finished my internship. However, because I decided to change my research focus from anxiety to addictive behaviors during internship, none of my publications were in the area that my personal statement suggested that I would be studying. In my mind, this change was not cause for concern because I was simply transferring the study of basic emotional processes in anxiety to a new content area. Unfortunately, I did not clearly establish this link and most probably left the application reviewers wondering if I was likely to capriciously drift from one fleeting idea to the next. Fortunately, my current institution managed to see my plan without my help and once I made it to the interview I was able to tell the story of what I had done and why it was relevant to what I wanted to do and exactly where I would go in the future.

This illustration is not offered to argue that one should not pursue one's interests in favor of being marketable; instead, one should consider marketability when preparing materials. In addition to forcing one to provide a larger research framework, it also forces tough questions about whether or not one is at a point in one's career to seek out a position or if additional time and training opportunities might be most helpful to long-term career development. Again, I was fortunate enough to get a job I wanted, but the time I spent applying alternatively could have been used to acquire a more developed track record in addictions research and tell a more compelling story about how and why I was ready to take the next step.

Excelling in Your First Job: Developing Your Intellectual Wheelhouse

Identifying Your Intellectual Wheelhouse

Academic lessons can come from a variety of nonacademic sources. As stated above, one crucial challenge in starting a new job is to find your own path. Although discipline and commitment to hard work cannot be underestimated, it is equally important to channel

your energy in the most productive manner for you. This can be an incredibly difficult challenge within an academic context because you will be pushed and pulled in many different directions and it will be up to you to decide in which direction to make your mark. Although there are no easy answers to these questions, useful guidance can be taken from the game of baseball.

The basic rules of hitting a baseball revolve around a strike zone, which is an imaginary box from the hitter's knees to chest and spanning across home plate. A hitter is given a strike for every pitch swung at and missed and also for every pitch not swung at that is thrown into the strike zone. The hitter is allowed three strikes before striking out. In general, hitters are taught to avoid pitches outside of the strike zone and to swing at pitches thrown within the strike zone. However, within the strike zone, most hitters have a region of preference. For example, a lanky player might excel with knee-high pitches on the outside of the plate that allow for full bat extension (i.e., low and away pitches), whereas more compact stocky players may work best with chest-high pitches on the inside of the plate (i.e., high and inside pitches) that better suit a more powerful, compact swing. This area of preference has come to be called the player's "wheelhouse." Although hitters may often need to swing at pitches in less preferred areas of the strike zone, patiently allowing a few pitches in the less preferred areas of the strike zone can allow for the opportunity to swing at pitches in one's wheelhouse, with often more fortuitous results.

Although patience may be a key to taking advantage of one's wheelhouse, the first key is actually figuring out where one's wheelhouse lies. Obviously, one method involves swinging at most pitches and figuring it out the hard way. The bad news is that if finding out the hard way involves a lot of strike-outs, then the batter may end up on the bench before the benefits of experience kick in. So, although some trial and error is important, other approaches should be considered.

Get Help Developing Your Intellectual Wheelhouse

At many universities, junior faculty are encouraged to develop their own path and demonstrate that they are able to develop and cultivate their own program of research. Clearly, one would be in some danger going up for tenure with a list of publications all conceived and developed by others. With that said, developing mentorlike collaborative relationships can be a key to both increasing your productivity but also for continuing education and professional development. Who better than a senior faculty member to help you navigate through the early stages of your career? Although some senior faculty members take a

special interest in mentoring junior faculty, it's a mistake to think that most faculty will meaningfully help advance your career just as a matter of course. As with anything in life, people are motivated to invest their time and energy where they have confidence that it is most likely to have the greatest impact. Below are three strategies to inspire such confidence in others regarding your professional development.

One strategy is to ask to attend another faculty member's lab meeting. This adds almost no initial extra effort on their part and gives you a chance to get a sense of what his or her lab is doing and how your interests might intersect and allow you and the faculty member to get to know each other better. For example, I am currently engaged in a collaboration with a senior faculty member in the cognitive psychology program. When I initially arrived at the University of Maryland, it seemed to me that he was a good person to help me develop certain aspects of my research ideas. However, it also was exceedingly clear that he was extremely busy. Not wanting to take up any of his time, but still wanting time to learn from him, I asked to start coming to his lab meetings. For the first few months, I didn't participate too much and really tried to learn the basics of his lab and the ongoing projects. As time progressed and I was able to get a better handle on what they were doing and how to discuss the issues germane to his lab, I was able to draw parallels between the work of his research group and the work I was doing. These parallels were spread out over several months in lab meetings, but it was well worth the time. In addition to learning quite a bit about basic cognitive science, we have since developed and completed several experiments, a conceptual paper, and are in the process of preparing a grant application to NIH. I firmly believe that this collaboration was made feasible through patience and a willingness to clarify how the mentorship I was interested in receiving could benefit everyone involved.

A second strategy is to invite a faculty member onto an existing project. As he or she is likely to be very busy, it is crucial to specify a particular plan for their contribution. Assuming this collaboration is in the best interest of both parties, several benefits may arise. In addition to results mentioned above, such an experience will likely give the other faculty member a chance to observe your skills and may set the stage for future articles and grant applications. Another benefit is that they can observe your progress in the department and provide feedback on how to stay on course for tenure and beyond. Although it is important to show your independence on manuscripts and other research products, the presence of another faculty member is likely to be viewed very differently if it is a project you

conceived as opposed to riding that person's coattails.

As a third strategy, one might invite a faculty member to lunch. Typically, senior faculty invite junior faculty members to lunch in the first few weeks. Yet, rarely does the junior faculty member extend the invitation back to the senior faculty. Although junior faculty are not exactly financially independent, it's a far cry from the poverty of graduate school, and a few lunches can be a worthwhile investment. In preparing to make the most of the lunch, one strategy is to read through a few of the individual's recent articles and develop a few questions. These questions can be the more basic type related to information presented in the article, but also may focus on implications and future directions that may intersect with your interests. Once you have developed these questions, you may use these as the focus of lunch (after all, you probably already answered all the surface questions like where you live and if you prefer dogs or cats by this point in the year). Too often as junior faculty we are so overwhelmed with settling in that we rarely focus much on the senior faculty and their research. In this way, having put some thought into the person's work and how it fits with your work really will make you stand out and might provide some impetus for that person to seriously consider a collaboration.

Making the Most of Your Wheelhouse Once You Find It

This manuscript is primarily about making it in a research-focused psychology department, but the best lesson I learned about making the most of my own personal intellectual wheelhouse came from my 2 years in the psychiatry department at Brown Medical School. The group I worked with at Brown was nothing short of amazing. In addition to the more senior group head, six young Ph.D.s worked in our team. Individually, we were all clearly junior, with quite a bit of room to grow intellectually and professionally. But we each had a clear individual strength (wheelhouse), including conceptual vision, experiment development, study implementation, test construction, advanced statistical analysis, and grant/manuscript preparation. Therefore, despite professional limitations at an individual level, we combined to form a strong team that successfully produced several NIH-funded grants and Tier 1 journal publications. Of possibly greater impact, however, was my opportunity to learn skills from others. One might suspect that if I was focusing on methodology, my ability to write an introduction might suffer, but the opposite turned out to be true. Although I was not the primary person working on all aspects of the study and manuscript, the cohesiveness of the team provided ample opportunities to discuss issues with the person taking the lead in one area and to see the qual-

ity of a final product. Out of this experience came the opportunity to hone the skills in my wheelhouse, but also to learn from others when in their wheelhouse.

So why doesn't the situation I described above exist everywhere? Well, obviously there are practical issues in a psychology department where individual fiefdoms predominate over research teams consisting of faculty-level researchers. I also believe that this particular situation is hard to find in many places because it is difficult for junior faculty who are trying to establish themselves to take a secondary role, even when more senior researchers are involved. Again, keeping an eye on the long-term, you might gain considerably more taking a secondary role now and using the experiences to help you into your primary role in other aspects of your current work and future, more large-scale endeavors.

Giving the Devil's Advocate His Due

One of the main thrusts of this discussion includes paying dues and worrying more about long-term gain through low-profile stepping stones. Of course, with any advice, the devil's advocate must get his due. A well-developed intellectual wheelhouse can make you highly valuable and lead to many exciting opportunities as others begin to see your talents, but one also must be careful about becoming a glorified research tech whose hard work propels the career of others. Indeed, you will become "et al." mighty quickly on your third-author manuscripts in the same way that a distinction of Co-Investigator or even Co-Principal Investigator on a grant carries about as much weight with your university and NIH as does the role of Robin in Gotham City. Again, part of this involves paying dues and chasing long-term goals at first, but it also is crucial to realize when such an approach no longer is in either your best short- or long-term interest.

So, where do you draw the line? Again it depends on one's own situation, including qualities of the collaboration and one's own skills and aspirations. With that said, a good general rule is to be aware of long-term value over short-term needs and allow your wheelhouse to take you there. Getting less credit in exchange for valuable experiences and opportunities can make one a better academic and propel one's career. In following this path, however, it is crucial to be aware of your long-term goals and to address weaknesses along the way to allow you to establish your independence when you are ready.

Summary

Embarking on an academic career path in a psychology department can be a rewarding yet daunting task even for individuals with outstanding training and skills. As such, it is

necessary to be sure that this is the right path for you. In addition to considerations for those who are unsure about this path, I have outlined a variety of strategies for maximizing one's ability to obtain the right job and excel once given the opportunity. In the end, I firmly believe that if you have taken the right career path for you and consider ways to make the most of your hard work, publications, grants, and tenure will not be far behind.

Carl W. Lejuez received his Ph.D. in 2000 from West Virginia University. After completing his internship at the Brown University Clinical Psychology Training Consortium, he took a position as an Assistant Professor (Research) in the Department of Psychiatry at Brown Medical School and he joined the Clinical Psychology Program at the University of Maryland in 2001. He has co-authored over 65 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters and was the recipient of the 2001 APA Division 3 (Experimental Psychology: Applied) Young Investigator Award. He is currently the PI on two grants from NIDA (R01 DA15375; R21 DA14699) and serves as the primary mentor on two NIH NRSA grants and a Minority Research Supplement awarded to students in his laboratory. Although he feels strongly about what is written here, wisdom acquired over his career will likely lead him to look back at this manuscript and shake his head in disbelief.

- **When you started graduate school, what did you think you were going to do after you got your degree?** I knew as an undergraduate that I wanted to be a professor in a psychology department. I really admired my undergraduate advisor and wanted to follow in his footsteps.
- **What did you want to do when you finished graduate school?** See above.
- **How long did it take before you got over the "imposter syndrome" (the feeling that you're not as much of an expert on topics as other people think you are, or that they will "figure out" that you actually don't know what you're talking about)?** See below.
- **What helped you get over the imposter syndrome, if you have at all?** Being upfront and honest about what I don't know. At my job talk at Maryland, I was asked a question that I clearly didn't even know how to address. I started to speak and as I heard the nonsense coming out of mouth, I stopped, and politely said that I just didn't know the answer, and mentioned that I would look into it more closely when I returned home and send the questioner an email response. I was a little embarrassed but several people remarked later in the day

that they found it to be a strength as opposed to a weakness. So, although it's always better to have a well-conceived answer than no answer at all, it's also better to have no answer than to bulls**t people.

- How has AABT helped you in your professional development/career? Primarily with networking and presentation skills. ✍