

Nontraditional and Unexpected Paths to Success in Academia: Maximizing Options

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Writing about the development of one's career path can be a daunting task. On the one hand, I have the luxury of hindsight, and therefore can pay attention to the particular decisions, situations, and challenges that presented at each major transition point. On the other hand, it is quite humbling to look back and reflect on the choices one has made, the opportunities that arose, as well as the paths not taken. I offer these reflections as "food for thought" to those who are in the early stages of their careers, with the goal of demonstrating the unique and nontraditional paths that can lead to a successful career as a clinical psychologist, however one chooses to define success.

My career path is marked by what I would describe as the juxtaposition of traditional and nontraditional paths and outcomes. I trained at Princeton and SUNY Stony Brook, both settings that reinforced careers in research and academia. However, my entry into academia was nontraditional: I opted not to do a post-doctoral fellowship, and instead worked as a clinical psychologist in a college counseling center for 3 years, and also taught part-time. This allowed me the flexibility to continue my research, teaching, and practice, as well as have two children without the pressure of "the tenure clock." I knew that some compromise would be necessary in order for me to begin my career and start a family, and working as a clinician in a college setting provided such flexibility. The timing of my marriage and children's births forced me to balance job flexibility with maximum options for career growth—thus, for example, I began work on the first edition of a multicultural women's studies textbook with two colleagues while I was at the counseling center and pregnant with my first child, and also wrote manuscripts focusing on issues in therapy with women. These types of projects kept me active in terms of research, without the pressure to "publish or perish," and writing on clinical

topics complemented the work I was already doing in the counseling center. Additionally, these research opportunities were not part of my clinical position; rather, I sought out these projects so that I would have manuscripts in the research pipeline.

I continued working at the counseling center until two things unexpectedly occurred: I began to feel that working full-time as a clinician wasn't as fulfilling as it had been—I distinctly remember thinking that I needed to be in an environment that supported the integration of clinical, research, and teaching; and I received a call from a psychology department chair at nearby college inquiring whether I was interested in applying for a position. By this time, I was pregnant with my second child, and literally jumped at the opportunity to start a tenure-track position as an assistant professor at a small liberal arts college. At this point, I was attracted to such a setting, for I perceived it to be conducive to combining teaching and research in an environment more "low-key" than a major research university. In addition, the psychology department had a master's program in counseling psychology, so I would have the opportunity to supervise and work with graduate students in a clinical setting.

During this time, I was acutely aware of the necessity of staying involved in both research and clinical work. While an assistant professor, I also maintained a small private practice. It was clear to me that such involvement maximized the opportunities for a clinical psychologist to move from one setting to another. This was important to me for two reasons: I enjoyed doing clinical work, research, and teaching, and wanted to keep those skills fresh; and I also knew that the academic setting provided the flexibility I needed as I was raising young children. My husband was also an assistant professor at this same college during this period, so this arrangement was about as ideal as one could imagine.

However, opportunity knocked again two years later, when I was recruited for a faculty position in the clinical psychology program at the University of Georgia. What a major difference, teaching in a small college of approximately 7,000 students, versus moving to a Research I institution. I was attracted to the opportunity to train doctoral students in clinical psychology, as well as being in an academic environment that provided the resources and support for developing my research program. The major focus of my work as a faculty member in a small college was on teaching, and there was very little support of research, particularly grant-funded work. I knew that if I wanted to conduct empirical studies in the area of alcohol use and risky sexual behavior, I would need to be in a different research environment. Thus, when I received a call from Georgia, I couldn't turn it down. As much as I enjoyed life on a small college campus and the interaction among students and faculty, the opportunity to contribute to the training of doctoral students, and continue my research in a more intensive setting, was very appealing.

My move from a small liberal arts college to a major research university signaled a significant transition in my career, as the demands to be even more productive in publishing and obtaining extramural funding became more salient. The role of my mentor during this period was critical, and I know that without her, navigating the waters of academia would have been much more difficult. The fact that my mentor understood this shift in my orientation to my work (slowly moving from the clinical to the research end of the continuum) was critical in helping me to make this move. It's important to note, however, that when I started my career, I did not expect to be at a Research I institution; I had concluded early on that a small liberal arts setting would be more consistent with my inclination to integrate my clinical, research, and

teaching interests. However, because I kept my options open (presumably, at that time, to increase my job flexibility since I wanted to balance career and family), I was prepared to make the move to a large research university.

My stay at the University of Georgia lasted 12 years. During that period, I obtained tenure and was promoted to Associate Professor, became Associate Director of the Clinical Psychology Program, was major professor for 11 doctoral students, and obtained several extramural grants (NIMH, NIDA). My professional identity was clearly that of a clinical psychology professor, and I was strongly committed to making training and research contributions in the areas of multicultural competence and diversity. My work had a consistent theme of addressing the contextually based influences of gender and ethnicity on alcohol use and risky sexual behavior related to HIV risk. Currently, my research focuses most directly on the development of community and family-based interventions for African American youth, targeting substance use and risky sexual behavior. The textbook that I had started working on when I was at the counseling center 17 years ago is now going into its fourth edition. My children, who were 5 and 2 years old when we moved to Georgia, are now 17 and 14. I had reached a point in my professional development where I was very satisfied with my research, teaching, and clinical responsibilities, and felt most gratified while mentoring my doctoral students, all of whom have been quite active in AABT over the years. I was looking forward to being more involved in the administration of the clinical training program, and continuing my research collaborations with colleagues there. As far as I was concerned, I was prepared to continue in this path at UGA until retirement, and any additions, revisions, or permutations of my professional identity seemed completely moot.

However, another unexpected opportunity recently arose, which allowed me to consider different ways in which I can make contributions in academia. I now find myself in a new setting—as Associate Provost of Research and Professor of Psychology at Spelman College in Atlanta. In this position, I am responsible for developing research infrastructure and capacity, which also includes faculty research development at this leading historically black college for women. Several factors made the move to Spelman extremely attractive: First, the fact that Spelman is a premier educational institution that has a strong record of training African American women who go on to graduate study and careers as scientists was consistent with my strong commitment to diversity and equity in graduate education. Second, the opportunity and challenge associated with developing a research-supportive climate at a

small liberal arts college resonated with the experiences I had at each one of my prior positions. Although the majority of my time is devoted to administrative activities, I am still involved in my research and will begin teaching again in a few years.

On the surface, this position appears to be a radical departure from my role as a faculty member. However, I am essentially bringing my research and teaching experiences at a Research I institution to a liberal arts setting so that collaborative research activities for faculty and students can flourish. Whereas previously, I was training doctoral students one-on-one, I am now influencing the research experiences of faculty (particularly junior faculty) and students who are preparing for graduate school through developing initiatives and influencing policy. My professional identity has again shifted, this time bringing into sharper focus my interests, skills, and commitment to the education and research experiences of women and minorities. However, I remain committed to continuing my own research and teaching. While I will not teach for a few years, I brought one of my grants with me and am preparing another proposal for submission. Additionally, I'm still working on the women's studies textbook, which is now even more relevant to me professionally given the educational environment at Spelman. I will continue my affiliation with UGA as an adjunct professor, and therefore will mentor and supervise my doctoral students there until they complete their dissertations. Furthermore, as I state quite clearly to my new colleagues, my experiences as a faculty member inform the decisions I make as an administrator whose responsibility is to support faculty research development.

I share this brief outline of my career to illustrate the importance of being prepared to take advantage of opportunities that may unexpectedly present themselves. My focus on research activities, regardless of the type of academic institution with which I was affiliated, allowed me to move from a small liberal arts college to a large research university and then back to a small college as Associate Provost. In many ways, I consider my record in research and, later on, graduate training to have set the stage for my ability to move from setting to setting. A strategy I developed early in my career to support my ability to balance family and work ultimately provided me with the skills and experiences that allowed me to take advantage of unexpected challenges and opportunities. I offer the following reflections to colleagues starting out in the field, to assist in maximizing the potential for research productivity in an academic setting. I have found that this aspect of professional development is key to surviving in academia:

Prioritize your projects, responsibilities, and commitments, both before and after

tenure. Never underestimate the importance of protecting the time and energy you devote to writing and publishing. This is always much easier said than done—it's never easy to be consistently assertive in the workplace, particularly when there are so many competing demands on your time. A combination of diplomatically saying no to activities that will not contribute to your research productivity and efforts, as well as effective time-management skills, is a good first step for junior faculty to learn in protecting their time.

Be flexible, both in terms of the big and small pictures. By this I refer to the importance of achieving a sense of balance in your work responsibilities, say, from year to year, but also from day to day. You may spend most of one week preparing for your classes at the beginning of the semester, knowing that next week you'll focus on that manuscript you've been meaning to finish. Alternatively, you may also benefit from multitasking, or shifting tasks within a short time period (i.e., 1 hour!). Be flexible in your ability to shift priorities from time to time so that over the long haul, you are productive and feel a sense of balance in your responsibilities and your accomplishments.

An important component of being flexible and achieving some degree of balance is being able to set boundaries firmly without feeling guilty. Assertiveness goes a long way toward helping one to safeguard the time and energy required to meet your professional goals, particularly those related to publishing. Again, this is related to being clear about and setting your priorities. Don't be afraid to let others know that you're saying no to a particular committee because you have several pilot studies you need to conduct this semester in order to write your grant proposal next semester. Your colleagues will understand the pressures and deadlines you are facing, and you will be glad that you didn't set yourself up for being overwhelmed.

Informal as well as formal mentors (i.e., those provided by structured mentoring programs) are key in guiding the direction and course of one's career, not only by providing guidance and feedback, but also by helping one to survive the day-to-day grind of academia. If you don't have a mentor, seek out someone whose career path you respect and admire, and with whom you feel comfortable discussing your thoughts, concerns, and dreams about your own career. Often this person is a professor from graduate school. But a mentor can also be someone you meet in your job setting. Ideally, your mentor will understand the demands associated with your position and can provide you the feedback and guidance that will allow you to make the most profitable decisions.

One of the most important lessons I've learned is that the path one's career takes is

not easily predicted or planned. Goals and priorities change as one is exposed to new people, mentors, settings, and challenges. For example, I never would have imagined I would be at my present position when I finished graduate school, given my interests in community approaches to mental health at that time. Interestingly, however, my work in developing community and family-based interventions for African American youth is remarkably similar to these earlier career goals. I may not have been able to predict the precise path of my career, but by strategically focusing my activities on my core professional interests, and being flexible in my orientation toward achieving these goals (which shift over time), I have been able to achieve some measure of professional satisfaction and fulfillment. While I would not presume that these strategies would serve everyone equally well, I offer them to individuals starting out in the field as a perspective to consider for developing and maintaining a successful career as a clinical psychologist.

Lily D. McNair received her A.B. in Psychology from Princeton University. She received her M.A. and Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from SUNY-Stony Brook. After a 12-year tenure at University of Georgia, Dr. McNair recently accepted the position of Associate Provost of Research and Professor of Psychology at Spelman College. Her

research interests include the development of community and family-based interventions for African American youth, targeting substance use and risky sexual behavior. Dr. McNair is a Fellow for the Institute of Behavioral Research. She has been the recipient of a number of extramural grants and has authored numerous articles and book chapters on substance abuse and African American women's health issues. She is the co-author of the textbook Women: Images and Realities. A Multicultural Anthology of Women in the United States, now in its 3rd edition. She currently is the co-president of the AABT African Americans in Behavior Therapy Special Interest Group.

- **When you started graduate school, what did you think you were going to do after you got your degree?** I thought I would be involved in providing clinical services in a community setting, and conducting research on issues relevant to African Americans' mental health. I did not think academia suited me, mostly because I was more interested in the role of community settings and interventions as they influenced psychological well-being.
- **What did you want to do when you finished graduate school?** I wanted to be a community psychologist and teach people psychology principles that would help them improve their own lives and communities.

- **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)?** I think it was getting tenure that helped me the most.

- **What helped you get over the imposter syndrome, if you have at all?** Up until the point I received tenure, we (assistant professors) are so consistently and frequently evaluated, that it's very difficult to imagine that we really know what we're doing. Earning tenure allowed me to relax and realize that I really do have something valuable to contribute to the field, my department, and to my students.

- **How has AABT helped you in your professional development/career?** My involvement in AABT has been instrumental in moving my career forward. My mentor and former professors are active members, and thus their influence on my clinical work and research is strong to this day. Additionally, I continue to meet new people at AABT whose research and clinical presentations bring new perspectives to my work. My involvement with the African American SIG has been particularly rewarding, as this provides opportunities to dialogue and collaborate with other African American professionals and students. ✍