Advice for New Faculty

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It’s your first faculty job. Now what do you do? A panel of three psychological scientists who have been there, done that offer some advice.

What are the first things you should do as a brand new faculty member?

Kim Penberthy: Get a mentor if you have not already been assigned one. This should be a faculty member at a higher rank who has risen in your system. Check and see if there is a mentoring program in your institution and join it!

Jessica Schleider: I’m not sure if these are things everyone should do, but here are some things I did do and found helpful:

Find out who the “go-to” administrative folks are in and beyond your department. Who is the best person to ask about reimbursement procedures? Who knows about navigating the IRB? The logistics of preparing and submitting grants? HR and on-boarding? I found myself with a long, regenerating list of questions in my first year; learning where to direct those questions saved me time and frustration.

Set up your physical lab space ASAP. If your work involves inviting participants for lab visits, this is a critical first step to getting your research program up and running.

Reach out to other faculty to set up coffee/tea meetings, and not just in your department! I found that folks were very willing to meet with a brand-new assistant professor, and building those relationships opened doors for new collaborations (and even a funded grant) that I never would have thought of otherwise.

Create a plan/timeline for your grant applications for the coming year.

Collect examples of syllabi from other faculty in your department to inform the syllabi you need to create.

Find out from your chair/colleagues as much as you can about tenure-related expectations/goalposts related to grants, publications, teaching and service—along with what paperwork you’ll need to complete, and when (e.g., for second- or third-year reviews).

Be kind and patient with yourself. Your pace may be slower than what you would prefer in your first year. Given the many new systems, responsibilities, and logistics you need to navigate (not the least of which is building a life in a brand-new place), that makes perfect sense!

Evan Kleiman: Take some time to think through your lab culture, your lab structure (will it be large?
small? will you have postdocs?), and your lab infrastructure (what will you use the space for?). It’s worth thinking things through before you jump right in. It’s going to seem like you have to do everything at once, but this isn’t true—it’s worth it to take some time and learn the university’s system, whom to ask for help, and to think through how you want your first weeks/months/years as a faculty member to go.

**What do you see as the best way(s) to build a program of research when just starting out with your own lab (prioritizing low-hanging fruit vs. more ambitious projects, what to do about longstanding and fruitful collaborations when your being told to “demonstrate independence,” etc.)?**

**Kim:** You must continue to publish and this is often the most important priority. Making sure that you do continue to publish on standard things you are researching with yourself as first author is important and you must also continue to develop and maintain collaborative relationships with others in order to build the connections for more advanced research projects.

**Jessica:** I spent much of my first year wrapping up pre-existing projects, and applying for grants and building collaborations to support the larger-scale studies I am excited to pursue in the future. I was also in the fortunate position of having external funding for a clinical trial, which I was able to launch in my second semester. In terms of “demonstrating independence” — departments may have different attitudes and expectations in this domain, so I would suggest speaking with your chair for personalized suggestions. I know many newly-tenured faculty members who have continued to collaborate with their graduate advisors. To me, this makes perfect sense, because their shared interests led them to work together in the first place! As long as you have *some* areas of work that clearly depart from your advisor’s work, I tend to think you’ll be in good shape.

**Evan:** I like to have a mix of collaborations/projects that range from low-hanging fruit (e.g., analyzing data I collected during my postdoc) to new projects in my group with students to higher-risk projects that are contingent on grant funding.

**What advice do you have regarding setting up a research lab team? Specifically, would you take a graduate student in year one or limit it to undergraduates and/or project coordinators to help run studies the first year or two?**

**Kim:** I would take a grad student as soon as possible if that option is available — you can always learn together! I think paid project coordinates who are not students is absolutely necessary as well — this helps maintain continuity and typically has worked better for me.

**Jessica:** My first PhD students will arrive at the start of my second year as an assistant professor. I chose not to admit a student to start during my first year. My reasons were as follows:

I had accepted my position after the PhD application deadline had passed, so no students had applied to work specifically with me that cycle.
I was on clinical internship when I accepted my current position. I wanted to have at least some distance from graduate school before accepting my first PhD students!

Not all of my lab’s research relies on PhD student availability. I recruited several undergraduate and post-bacc research assistants (RAs), and that met my needs for the year. Also, my department has a terminal master’s program (MA), and I was able to mentor two MA students during my first year (our MA students match into labs after they arrive on campus). They became research assistants in the lab and were wonderful additions to our team!

**Evan:** I deferred my offer for a semester, so it wasn’t really an option to take a student my first year. But, if I could have, I wouldn’t since a lot of my first year has been spent setting up the lab and I think this would have taken a lot of time away from what’s needed for mentorship.

**Please share some tips or tricks for new lab set-up that you have found helpful and perhaps wouldn’t have predicted would be so impactful both to productivity but also for undergrad RA involvement and satisfaction?**

**Kim:** Work study students are a great way to go for some basic work. They are inexpensive and very helpful!

**Jessica:** At least three things have made a difference for me:

Weekly lab meetings in which *all* lab members, including undergraduate RAs, are active participants. This will become difficult as my lab grows, but my first year (there were nine of us; me, undergrad RAs, post-bacc RAs, and Master’s students) it was feasible for us all to meet as a group every week. Everyone contributes to those meetings. Lab members take turns giving 15-minute research presentations to the group – a sort of practice conference talk on a new paper in our field that’s of interest to everyone. I also ask all lab members to suggest discussion topics that the full group might benefit from (some recent ones: getting into grad school; applying for grants; developing research ideas; writing an IRB proposal). I like to think this helps to foster a sense that all of us are collaborators in the ongoing work, and that everyone has something to contribute — both of which I firmly believe.

I give undergraduates a fairly high degree of responsibility (e.g., recruiting, screening, and running participants through aspects of the study protocol as part of an ongoing clinical trial; coding for a meta-analysis). This is a big time investment on my end, because I train and supervise them. But it’s important to me, because receiving those types of opportunities in college allowed me to go to graduate school in the first place. With the right scaffolding, and lots of step-by-step protocols, I find that many undergrads rise to the challenge of high-level tasks.

I use Basecamp to distribute/track lab tasks and streamline communication. It’s an amazing platform — and you can get a free account as an educator!

**Evan:** Write up a lab manual and have procedures for as many tasks as possible (e.g., I use Asana and have “templates” for all kinds of repetitive tasks such as new RA onboarding). Make sure you clearly
assign who’s responsible for the task.

Order your furniture ASAP — I cannot stress this enough. I’ve heard a ton of stories about it taking months for furniture to come. I started 4 months early and still had to wait 8 months total!

In some ways, your lab is like a small business — this is very different from any other position we’re in up until this point. We’re responsible for money, people, etc. I make it a point to know how much money we have in the budget and what our plans are for that money—it’s very easy to overspend if you don’t watch your funding.

Don’t forget what it was like being a student — things like conference travel can be insanely expensive, and if you’re in a position to do so, you can help students with this. Make sure to have clear guidelines whenever possible for example. I make it clear that I’ll pay for travel to at least one conference per year for any grad student, postdoc, or full-time RA in my lab. Make sure you can fit this in your lab budget before committing to do so!

Try something like Slack — if you don’t know what it is, it’s like AIM for the workplace. If you don’t know what AIM is: (a) I feel old, and (b) it’s like Gchat for the workplace.

Did you encounter any faux pas to avoid or unwritten rules to follow that are important to know?

Kim: Each institution is bound to have these, and unfortunately sometimes you can only learn them from a mentor or when you violate them!

Jessica: I imagine this is setting dependent, so that’s an excellent question for your future department colleagues! (Beyond unwritten rules that exist across academic culture more broadly, I can’t think of any in particular.)

Evan: Generally speaking, no — but I think it’s important to get a sense of what the culture is like in your department (expectations for time in your office, students, and so on).

Did you feel it was expected for you to always be in your office as a new faculty member?

Kim: I think being present and visible is important; this may or may not involve “being in your office.”

Jessica: This varies by department culture, but in my case, no. Although to be accessible to my students and research assistants, I tend to work from my office anyway. I have a lot of autonomy in structuring my time — and am extremely grateful for that!

Evan: This varies a lot from department to department, but it’s clear that there wasn’t an expectation for me. I think the culture will be obvious early on, and you don’t always have to follow it (e.g., if no one’s in, you can still come in more often). Even if people are often in their offices, don’t feel pressured
to always have your door open. I’ll usually let people know I’m there if they need me (post-it on the door, Slack status message).

How do you build and maintain mutually beneficial collaborators at a new institution? (finding someone who is related to your work but can offer something different, finding someone who is willing to pull their weight in the work, establishing division of duties in new research endeavors, etc.) Is it better to build collaborative relationships with people in similar points of their career or with people who are more established?

**Kim:** I think it is important to develop relationships with people at all stages of their career because each will have different things they can offer you. Additionally, finding out what mechanisms your institution has for connecting with others and then making sure that you become involved in those is important. For instance, our institution has a committee on women, programs for new faculty, for faculty leaders, etc., and these are very helpful.

**Jessica:** Other responses have covered the first portion of your question. As for collaborating with early-career versus more established investigators: Both have pros and cons, and generalizations aren’t always helpful when it comes to choosing specific relationships to invest in. Personally, some of the work I’m proudest of has come from collaborations with folks who are energizing to work with, reliable, and kind. These people exist at all seniority levels!

**Evan:** I’d look around to other departments that complement what you want to do (e.g., stats, computer science) and get to know the person (directly or by talking to others) before committing to a project where you may not be happy with the collaboration. Related to this, you don’t have to immediately collaborate with people at your institution — in fact, it’s probably good to collaborate with people you know at other schools while you start up at your own, so you can get to know people. I’ve begun collaborations I’m very excited about here with a few people in my department, but at the same time, I’ve started new collaborations with collaborators I’ve been working with for a long time.

Re: points in collaborators’ careers — I mostly have long term collaborations with people at the same or similar stage. But I do have some ongoing collaborations with my former mentors. My former postdoctoral mentor is my most frequent collaborator, however, my three other most frequent collaborators are all around the same stage as I am (one soon-to-be assistant professor, one established assistant professor, and one soon-to-be associate professor).

What is the best way to network and build research collaborations with your new colleagues?

**Kim:** See above regarding finding out about existing structures, groups, etc. and joining! Also joining committees such as the CE or promotion and tenure or other committees can be very helpful.

**Jessica:** “Cold-emailing” people to express admiration for their work and an interest in meeting about a possible collaboration has never (to my knowledge!) hurt me, and has occasionally helped! If there is
any mutual interest area, I find it's easy (and fun) to build projects from meetings that result from these initial contacts.

**Evan:** Get to know them outside of faculty meetings e.g., ask them to grab lunch, etc. But, it's important to know that it's not always realistic to expect to collaborate with your colleagues the way that you did your former lab mates (it may also not even be encouraged). In psychology departments where the goal is breadth not depth, you may not have natural areas of overlap and this is OK (since you were hired to add to what the existing faculty do). But this doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be friendly with your colleagues and collaborate with them to help support the program. These people could potentially be your coworkers for life. So, most importantly, be a good citizen of your department.

Beyond being a good citizen of your department, be a good citizen of the field. Clinical psychology is a very small field and some people will be in your life for a long time (there are several members of SSCP who have known me since I was a teenager!). If you’re a good person, people come to know this. If you’re a jerk, they’ll know this too.

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