

AC 2010-1917: SURVIVAL TIPS FROM THE TRENCHES

Susan Lantz, Trine University

Dr. Lantz is currently the Chair of the Department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering at Trine University. She has been teaching for 17 years, at four different universities. She may be reached via email at [lantzs@trine.edu](mailto:lantz@trine.edu).

Adrienne Minerick, Mississippi State University

Dr. Minerick is Associate Professor of Chemical Engineering and Associate Professor of Biomedical Engineering, Mississippi State University. She is also Director of the Medical micro-Device Engineering Research Lab (M.D.-ERL) at Mississippi State. She may be reached via email at minerick@che.msstate.edu.)

Donna Reese, Mississippi State University

Professor Reese is currently the Associate Dean for Academics and Administration for the James Worth Bagley College of Engineering at Mississippi State University and a Professor of Computer Science and Engineering. She has been on the faculty at MSU since 1989. She may be reached via email at dreese@enr.msstate.edu.

Beena Sukumaran, Rowan University

Dr. Sukumaran is an Associate Professor in Civil Engineering at Rowan University. She completed her Ph.D. from Purdue University in 1996 and worked at Amoco Corporation and the Norwegian Geotechnical Institute before joining Rowan University in 1998. She may be reached via email at sukumaran@rowan.edu.

Survival Tips from the Trenches

Susan A. Lantz, Ph.D.; Trine University;
Adrienne R. Minerick, Ph.D., Michigan Technological University;
Donna S. Reese, Ph.D., Mississippi State University;
Beena Sukumaran, Ph.D., Rowan University

Abstract: Panel Discussion: Four women in academia---one with 5-10 years of experience, two with 10-20 years of experience, and one with 20-plus years experience---will offer advice, suggestions, and discuss tips and techniques that worked (or did not work) for them. The panelists include a woman who left academia for nine years, but returned two years ago.

Between them, these four women have five children, 148 referred journal publications, three book chapters, six books (novels) and two novellas, and 76 research grants and contracts, totaling \$9.4 million.

Susan's Top Ten Tips for Academic Survival

1. Live close to where you work. The more time you spend commuting, the less time you spend working or with your family.
2. Love your work. If you aren't passionate about either teaching or research, your work will become a job, not a career.
3. Balance your personal and professional lives. This can be difficult to do, and you can't always maintain a perfect balance, but strive to maintain the balance most weeks. (And don't forget to include an hour or so for yourself every day.)
4. Learn how to say no. Remember to use that word (in moderation) when asked to take on tasks that will not advance your career. (Corollary: Don't get bogged down with time-consuming tasks. Get through them as quickly as possible, then concentrate on activities that are more meaningful.)
5. Papers do not have to be perfect to be accepted; proposals do not have to be perfect to be funded. Well-written (but not perfect) proposals will be funded, and well-written (but not necessarily perfect) papers will be accepted for publication. The time spent polishing a paper or proposal from "very good" to "perfect" is, therefore, time that could be better spent.
6. Be active in your professional society. Committee membership or service as a session moderator at conferences is an excellent way to increase your recognition within your profession.
7. Learn to delegate (at work and at home). Convince your husband/significant other to cook two or three days a week, or to do the laundry, or to clean the house/apartment. Let a graduate student or postdoc do background research for your next paper or grant proposal.
8. Make friends who aren't academics. They might not understand everything you do, but they will understand *you*.
9. Find a mentor or role model. It is helpful to have a mentor within your department, within the university, and within the profession. Each mentor/role model will provide a different perspective on your career, all of which are valuable.

10. You are not Superwoman. You cannot leap tall buildings at a single bound, nor can you do everything. Choose the things that matter most and concentrate your time and energy on them.

Donna's Top Eleven Tips for Surviving in Academia

1. Don't try and get tenure in the first year, or the last year. You cannot get all the grants and/or papers published in the first year of the tenure track but neither can you wait till the last. Pace yourself.
2. Do things early on that can set you up for success in later years.
3. Compare yourself across the nation not down the hall. Don't look at what other people in your department (particularly ones that have been there for a while) had when they got tenure. Talk to peers at other similar institutions and see what their expectations for tenure and promotion are.
4. Build collaborations within your department, your school and your discipline. It's easier to get people in your department and institution to support you when they know your work. You need others outside your institution to be familiar with your work to provide letters of support for tenure and promotion.
5. Take on only meaningful service roles. Meaningful service roles for young faculty are things that will advance your career. Serve on the graduate admissions committee, so you can review graduate applications and maybe get first shot at promising new students for example. Consider a "theme" for your service and relate to your research.
6. Serve your technical society. This is also a good way to get people familiar with your work for external letters. Don't overdo it as an untenured faculty member though.
7. Don't try and be perfect in the classroom. There are two reasons for this. First, it is easy to let this consume your time and, generally, is not as productive for tenure and promotion as is research. Secondly, if you have things too "down pat" in the classroom, students can't see your thought process as you approach a problem. By all means be prepared, but you don't have to know the answer to every question that students might ask.
8. Find at least one mentor. A mentor inside your department, in your institution, and outside your institution can each give you different perspectives on your progress and problems. Sometimes all three perspectives are useful.
9. Don't be a perfectionist on papers and proposals. You don't want to submit papers and proposals that are not worthy, but you also do need to get them submitted. Any paper or proposal can be improved, but it can't get published or funded until submitted.
10. Balance your personal and professional lives. You don't want to get tenure, then find out your health and relationships are shot. Take time **really** away from work. Chances are it will give you a fresh perspective on the work and improve your personal life as well.
11. Find the people and projects that you are passionate about. If you enjoy the work and the people you work with, everything else will be much easier.

Beena's Top Ten Tips for Academic Survival

1. Do not be shy to ask to be nominated for awards or to self promote yourself: Women in general tend to be more hesitant than men at promoting themselves. You are the best advocate for yourself and your career and you should not underestimate your achievements.

2. Love what you do professionally so that the passion shines through either when you are in the classroom or doing research.
3. Keep current professionally and start early with grant writing. In most cases, your research will not be funded at the first shot. Keep trying and look at the feedback so that you can address what reviewers consider as weaknesses. Also, ask to serve on review panels so that you understand how the system works.
4. Do not try to do it all: Since lots of women still do bear more of the burden of child care, do not over-commit yourself. Find out what is important to be successful career wise and learn to say no when asked to perform too many service-related activities. Also, learn to delegate tasks both in the workplace and at home.
5. Make friends on campus outside the college: I have found this to be a very successful strategy for surviving in academia and on-campus to obtain an independent evaluation as well as to be successful on campus.
6. Get involved with your professional society: It is important to get involved with your professional organization either on committees or as a session chair for conferences, etc. so that you are recognized within the profession.
7. Seek out a mentor within and outside the institution.
8. Pre-tenure, minimize your service activities. Concentrate your efforts on research and teaching.
9. Ask for help so that you are not overwhelmed.
10. Prioritize so that you can get to the important tasks that will help you be successful at work and at home. Remember that you cannot do it all.

Adrienne's Top Ten Tips for Surviving in Academia

10. Don't take anything personally. You are, first and foremost, managing a career that when successful will positively impact a large number of students. If you get caught up in rumor mills and make decisions/act on second-hand information, you will not be able to communicate across existing group (clique, department, center, college lines). If you consistently and politely seek foundational information, suggest unbiased and fair solutions, others will look to you with opportunities.
9. Always advocate for yourself. In academia, you are managing a career, not simply a job. A career is a progression of increasing credentials, experience, and accolades. Others may periodically advocate for you, but don't assume this is the norm. Those around you who have good intentions usually don't have the time to do this for you – they are managing their own career.
8. Always advocate for your students (graduate, postdocs or other). Their career is intertwined with your own. When they are productive and earn accolades, so do you. When students truly believe that you have their best interest at heart, they will be more efficient in their research and will accept critiques and feedback in a constructive manner and work to improve themselves and their work.
7. Believe the best in colleagues and students, but don't fret or wonder 'why' when they demonstrate the worst. This attitude will create an enjoyable work climate near you even when the extended work climate is miserable. Good students will sometimes make poor (unethical, dishonest) decisions. Dealing with this in an impersonal, yet fair manner that demonstrates you have, long-term, their best interest at heart will teach them to be better people. Remember that colleagues sometimes act on misinformation or have reasons that

- you are unaware of for doing what they do. Accept it and move on. Seek other opportunities elsewhere.
6. Spend the vast majority of your time looking forward. Worrying about events that have passed can cripple your mood and bring productive advancement of your research/teaching/career to a crawl. This approach will also help you find solutions to challenges and will help you see around falsely positioned obstacles (see #3).
 5. Classify the tasks that you have to do into ‘maintenance’ and ‘productive.’ ‘Maintenance’ items can consume time, but do not move your career forward. No one earns good annual reviews/pay raises for doing a superior job at departmental maintenance items, although short-term compliments will flow. Excessively needy students are examples of this. It takes finesse to do, but pushing that student to greater independence benefits the student and you. Do not be a perfectionist about maintenance items – hurry through them as quickly as possible and don’t actively volunteer for more. While one must accept that in any given day, a portion of time is spend on maintenance items, try to maximize the time spent on productive tasks like writing (papers, grants, etc.), problem solving solutions to current research challenges, preparing lectures, reading the literature, and yes, more writing.
 4. Do not look for friends in your department/college. Seek friends across the university or in the community who are slightly removed from your professional progression. Carefully define the difference between friendly colleagues and true friends. A friendly colleague can be fun to visit with and get advice, but always remember that in the end they will make decisions to advance themselves, even if it may be to your detriment. A friendly colleague usually won’t be brutally honest with you when needed; they have a long-term interest in maintaining a collegial relationship and will worry that brutal honesty will compromise this. A true friend can be a confidant, tell you when you are wrong, and advise you on the hard problems. Just make sure you return the favor whenever possible!
 3. Accept that some people try to advance themselves and their career by tearing those around them down. Do not be surprised if this person is in administration (i.e., your department head). These people position obstacles in front of others and typically respond in meetings along the lines of “We can’t do that because XXX was done in the past.” or “You’ll have to do A, B, and C before your request can be considered.” Think of this type of individual as a challenge, and you get to exercise your superior wits to find creative ways around their obstacles. However, refer to #5 and make sure that you spend time working around obstacles to productive tasks and not to maintenance tasks. Above all, even if you encounter this type of person frequently, choose to not behave in this manner or learn these habits!
 2. For important initiatives, do your research and practice your pitch so that you can sell the idea to the appropriate individuals. If that person is a #3, don’t accept ‘no’ for an answer; look for other solutions and talk to other administrators (see #3).
 1. Enjoy your chosen profession. Be as efficient as possible during the time you have set aside for work. Rate each day according to #5 and compliment yourself for the productive items accomplished that day. During the times you have set aside for family, don’t spend time worrying about work. When you are out on a date with your husband/significant other, put 100 percent of your attention into being in love. When you are with your child(ren), thoroughly focus on them and enjoy it. Set aside some time for

yourself to do a relaxing hobby. When you need to lock yourself in your office for a weekend to complete a proposal, your family will understand, so long as it is not a really common event and the remainder of your family time is focused on just the family.