

MANAGING
YOUR
ACADEMIC
CAREER

D. Royce Sadler

Strategies for Success

Managing Your Academic Career

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Strategies for success

D. Royce Sadler

ALLEN & UNWIN

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First published in 1999 by
Allen & Unwin
9 Atchison Street, St Leonards NSW 1590 Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218
E-mail: frontdesk@allen-unwin.com.au
Web: <http://www.allen-unwin.com.au>

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Sadler, D. Royce (David Royce).
Managing your academic career: strategies for success.

Bibliography.
Includes index.
ISBN 1 86448 984 7.

1. College teachers — Employment. 2. College teaching — Vocational guidance. I. Title.

378.125023

Set in 11/13 pt Adobe Garamond by DOCUPRO, Sydney
Printed by SRM Production Services Sdn Bhd, Malaysia

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Calvin and Josaphine

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Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	xi
Part one: Academic life	
1 Defining your academic focus	3
2 Managing your time	9
3 Finding a mentor	17
4 Establishing an academic network	21
5 Performing on a selection committee	26
6 Designing a sabbatical	30
7 Writing research grant proposals	37
8 Changing academic fields	42
9 Coping with career interruptions	48
10 Confronting bias and discrimination	52
Part two: Applying for jobs and promotions	
11 Compiling a curriculum vitae	63
12 Developing a label for your career	68
13 Choosing academic referees	72

14	Assessing promotional prospects	77
15	Positioning for promotion	83
16	Learning after non-promotion	88
Part three: Teaching		
17	Helping students learn	95
18	Improving teaching through collaboration	100
19	Evaluating quality in teaching	111
20	Developing cultural sensitivity	117
21	Gaining entry to graduate supervision	123
22	Climbing out of a teaching rut	128
Part four: Publishing		
23	Developing a publishing program	137
24	Organising a publication syndicate	143
25	Weighing conference papers against journal articles	150
26	Resolving joint authorship	154
27	Analysing an editor's rejection	160
28	Measuring research productivity	165
Part five: PhD studies		
29	Beginning a PhD	175
30	Balancing competing priorities	182
31	Publishing during degree candidature	187
32	Converting your thesis into a book	191
Part six: A final word		
33	Maintaining a focus on university core business	199
Further reading		203
Index		205

Acknowledgments

I have a lot of people to thank. I am grateful to Griffith University for awarding me a period of special research leave. This freed me from teaching and administration so that I could write without hindrance. Thank you Judy Langton for typing the first transcripts from tape. A number of colleagues from a range of disciplines and universities read early versions of some of the chapters and provided valuable feedback that led to material improvement. I refer to Karen Hinett, Mary Keyes, Archie McKay, Janine Collins, Paul Grieve, Rita Di Mascio, Annie McCluskey, Joanna Peters, Parlo Singh, Paul Weeden and Heather Chipuer. None of them, however, is to be held accountable for the final result.

Thanks are also due to the original recipients of many of my memoranda. I am sure none of us saw them as raw material for a book at the time they were written. I thank all the participants in professional development workshops and seminars who asked me tough questions, spoke about their frustrations and dilemmas, or expressed concerns about problematic elements of academic life. I never would have

imagined half of these things without you. Ann Crabb, from the publishers Allen & Unwin, provided great support and quick responses to my e-mailed queries. The publishers' reviewers and editors provided valuable insights and suggestions that led to modifications in the final stages of writing. Ashley Sadler and Merideth Sadler, family critics and editors, helped with style and proofreading.

Finally, I am enormously indebted to my wife Merideth whose constant wisdom, loyalty and support have done so much to facilitate the development of my own career.

Introduction

This book is about creating and maintaining a positive and realistic perspective on an academic career, about getting your career under control and keeping it there, and about building productive and fulfilling relationships with colleagues. It is intended for a variety of readers: newly appointed faculty members, graduate students and teaching assistants who are considering an academic career, and seasoned players who are looking for re-invigoration or a different point of view. Deans and heads of departments may also find this book useful as a source of ideas, especially for advising colleagues about the character of academic life and options for career development.

When academics take up positions at universities or colleges, they are commonly given a short orientation program. This typically involves introductions to the key people in the department and the university; an outline of institutional policies, procedures, and organisational structures; a tour of the campus; and some idea of where to go for help. Along with other appointees, beginning academics may also attend a familiarisation workshop and be given an induction handbook for reference.

Managing Your Academic Career covers those important things that are not in the induction handbook, and which a faculty member is supposed to just pick up along the way. It should enable a recent appointee to navigate through the system and maintain a clear vision of what academic life is supposed to be about.

Although institutions set many of the parameters for carrying out academic work, for a large part of their daily activities no one supervises faculty members closely. They have a significant degree of personal autonomy in relation to how they develop priorities. This particular feature of academic life, which can be both liberating and disquieting at the same time, is shared with many other professionals and self-employed persons. Academic work, however, takes place in a unique environment in a special kind of enterprise. The nature of this work lies essentially in disseminating, renewing, preserving and extending knowledge. For this to occur effectively, academics need to have a sense of direction and enough resources, elbow room, collegial support and time to do the job properly. When they get their priorities right, job satisfaction rises, and the system provides rewards in the form of promotion, tenure or other benefits. When they get them wrong, disillusionment, discouragement and boredom often follow.

To play the academic game effectively requires an understanding of the context and the rules. Fortuitous circumstances do play a part, of course, but so do organisation, self-discipline and good timing. Persuasion, skill, wisdom and tact are often indispensable ingredients. Most academics work hard and love what they do: the teaching, the interaction with colleagues and the sense of contributing to the generation of knowledge. They are often captivated by their chosen discipline and put in long hours. This, however, is not always enough. Being sensitive to basic academic values and working within institutional constraints are two of the keys to success — not in the sense of having status or of exercising power over others, but of

enjoying academic work and having one's efforts and achievements recognised and rewarded.

Except in a few places, most of the book is written in the form of letters or memoranda to hypothetical early-career faculty members. Almost all these letters have their roots in real memoranda, personal conversations with colleagues, and questions raised at professional development seminars. They reflect the way I see things, and therefore my own values, priorities and prejudices. Because what makes for a successful career is open to interpretation, alternative perspectives and ways of doing things need to be evaluated. No single model or pattern will work for all circumstances. Readers will have to make their own decisions in the light of their career development to date, the character of the institution in which they work, and where they hope to be in the future. They will also need to allow for their personal circumstances, such as the ability to take up opportunities whenever and wherever they arise, family commitments, the need for security, and their tolerance of risk.

In recent years, higher education systems in many countries have been characterised by turbulence and uncertainty. Burgeoning student numbers, severe funding restrictions and a philosophy of economic rationalism have led to marked changes in institutional expectations, academic conditions and patterns of employment. These have made it harder to plan for an academic career, simply because there is no formula that is certain to work under all conditions. Despite that, it still makes good sense to develop a personal career perspective, to position oneself strategically within one's chosen field, and to re-position periodically as circumstances change.

The advice given here is general rather than specific. What some readers regard as common knowledge or just plain commonsense may be new to others, depending on their degree of prior acculturation into the traditions of their field or institution. Typical career paths differ from discipline to discipline.

In some fields, undergraduate students often progress directly from undergraduate to graduate studies, complete their doctoral or advanced degree programs, work in research teams, and then move into academic posts. Except for the staging that comes with completion of each qualification or employment contract, the process is an almost continuous affair. In other disciplines, especially professional areas, new graduates may first move into work outside the university system. After several years of professional practice, they may decide to further their studies through courses taken part-time. Eventually, working in a college or university may appeal to them as a career shift. Whether the letters in this book apply directly to you or not, it is nevertheless important to understand the situations and challenges faced by colleagues in other departments.

Each letter is able to be read independently of the others. This is to allow for convenient browsing. The short title for each letter does not necessarily signal everything covered in that letter. In addition, some themes are touched upon in several letters. The index is the best guide to where the various issues are dealt with. The books listed in the bibliography contain specialised information on personal organisation, writing applications and turning the academic appraisal process into a positive experience.

If you are poised at the beginning of an academic career, this collection will encourage you to understand the context in which you are working, to think about career directions, to exercise initiative and power, and to gain more satisfaction from academic life. Don't be overwhelmed by all there is to know; simply dip into the book whenever the need arises. I hope you find it interesting and useful.

D. Royce Sadler

Griffith University, Brisbane

Part one ACADEMIC LIFE

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1 Defining your academic focus

Dear Chris,

Congratulations on landing your new job! You asked for some frank advice on getting yourself started along the academic road. This is how I see things.

First of all, you need to become quite focused, channelling your reading, thinking, your research and your writing so that you are able to go deep into your field. If you want the experience and the excitement of being with the front-runners, you cannot afford to spread yourself too thinly. This is imperative for all academics: those who have just completed their PhDs after studying more or less continuously since their undergraduate years, those who have been working in a professional field before joining the academic ranks, and those with other backgrounds entirely.

Think carefully about your interests and academic commitments, including your teaching assignments and the terms of your appointment. Focus on what seems to be the essence of these, and work towards putting a short descriptive label

on your main area of interest. This is what I refer to as an 'academic patch'. Matters outside the patch may well be interesting, but you should not allow them to assume too much importance. The patch itself is the thing.

The patch needs to have enough scope and variety to keep you fascinated and ensure your ability to cross-fertilise from one sub-area to another, but not be so extensive that you risk losing the plot or becoming seriously sidetracked. If you set the parameters of your interest too broadly, your patch may include too much and be unwieldy. If the parameters you set are too narrow, it may be too small for you to work in satisfactorily. You could then exhaust that field fairly quickly — or at least temporarily run out of challenging problems, and perhaps lose interest and enthusiasm. In general, avoid areas that are so esoteric that they could limit your future employment opportunities.

In your case, you have come into academic life after working in your profession. Defining a focus in this way may at first appear to draw you too far away from the interests of your former colleagues and the group of practitioners who may eventually become your graduate students. On the other hand, you are clearly aware of the problems that your profession is facing. The roots of those problems could well be tied up with inadequate conceptualisations of what the fundamental concerns really are. Often, practitioners struggle to put certain ideas into practice, unaware that the ideas themselves are flawed or incoherent.

Your combination of professional experience and theoretical knowledge gives you a valuable perspective. Many practitioners have a suspicion of theory and theorising, and there is some justification for that. They see it as mumbo jumbo, having no relevance to the real world and its problems. There is obviously a sense in which theorising, if it is too abstract and removed from the world of practice, is unable to contribute anything much to the field. However, there are

other kinds of theorising that academics are ideally placed to pursue — mainly because of their training, but also because of the expectations in a university setting and the resources available to them. Faculty members often have at their fingertips the facilities — including a supportive environment and a reward system — that promote serious scholarship.

Some of this professional scholarship could, and should, be disseminated through academic journals. These provide a real test of its coherence, logical consistency, and power. On the other hand, if that knowledge remains purely at the academic level, it is unlikely to influence or be appreciated by the profession at large. You may find it useful, therefore, to run parallel streams of dissemination: one for an academic audience, the other for a professional audience. Both streams would need to have intellectual integrity, but would be shaped specifically for the differing needs of the two groups.

If you do decide to pursue one direction rather than many, here are a few more suggestions. The first is to burn bridges with the other areas that have interested you in the past, and be fairly ruthless about it. Otherwise they may function as an attractive diversion when things get difficult in your chosen domain. Where these other interests involve colleagues, you may have to explain to those colleagues what you are doing, and seek their understanding. This would reduce the possibility that your actions could be misinterpreted as being unfriendly or unsupportive. Your colleagues may be surprised initially, but I think most of them would, given time, come to respect your reasoning. I am always intrigued when I look through the research interests nominated by a group of academics. Some people have lists that go on forever. I suspect that many of those long lists signal a lack of focus and academic direction rather than a true breadth of expertise and vision.

Second, maintain this focus, as far as possible, in your teaching responsibilities. That way, you will build up a high