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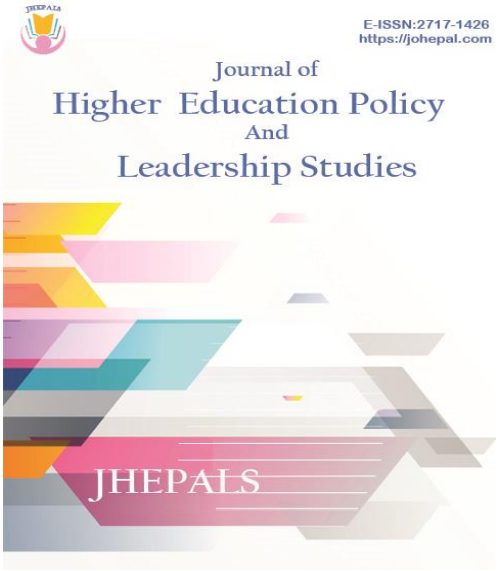

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Carrying Bricks: Guiding Pre-Tenure Program Coordinators from Survival to Superstars

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to discuss a) the dual role of the assistant professor/ program coordinator, b) specific strategies for developing pre-tenure survival skills and c) leveraging the pseudo administrative duties of a program coordinator to forge a unique and diversified professional portfolio for leadership opportunities post-tenure. The tenure and promotion process at many higher education institutions requires faculty members to publish research and present at regional, national, and international conferences, but new tenure-track faculty in the program coordinator role must also balance and manage other job responsibilities. An apt analogy for this process is a bricklayer who is expected to lay a perfectly straight, clean wall while fatigued from carrying bricks all morning from worksite to worksite. The new assistant professor/program coordinator who chooses to carry the appropriate quantity of bricks while still maintaining quality, can successfully pave the way to long-term success in academia.

Keywords: Assistant Professor; Tenure; Program Coordinator; Academic Administration; Promotion and Tenure Strategies

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Introduction

The road to a successful career in higher education can be rocky and has many potholes to navigate along the way. Embarking on a career as a new tenure-track professor comes with the honor of meeting the rigorous academic requirements to be considered and hired for such a position, but also with the realization that the challenge has just begun. The first and most stressful hurdle for new tenure-track assistant professors is earning tenure and being promoted to the rank of associate professor (Ling & Ling, 2020; Mu & Hatch, 2020). At many higher education institutions, this process typically involves a five- to six-year probationary period during which the faculty member is carefully assessed in three distinct skill areas: teaching, research, and service (James et al., 2020; Merlo, 2016). Although all three areas are included, they are often not measured equally as it has been noted that the phrase 'publish or perish' underscores the particularly daunting challenge within the area of research (Ashcraft et al., 2021; Flaherty, 2018). For some faculty members, it is their research agenda and acumen that most clearly demonstrate not only their professional work, but also their identity. As such, most new assistant professors make this aspect of the tenure and promotion process a priority even before the first day of their faculty appointment. However, implementing a research agenda does not occur independently. Faculty are often required to serve on varied institutional committees as well as designing and teaching multiple courses effectively (Hackman & Wanat, 2016). Moreover, for a select group of novice assistant professors, department chairs also require them to serve in an administrative capacity as program directors/coordinators (Hackman & Wanat, 2016; Ingle et al., 2018).

Navigating the multiple responsibilities expected of faculty is undoubtedly a challenge. An apt analogy for this process is a bricklayer who is expected to lay a perfectly straight, clean wall in the afternoon while fatigued from carrying bricks all morning from worksite to worksite. The bricklayer can be compared to an assistant professor/program coordinator who is expected to create and maintain a successful program while also performing their required duties to achieve tenure. Some examples of the *academic bricks* that these faculty must carry include: recruiting and advising candidates, analyzing transcripts, hiring adjuncts, supervising faculty members, and collecting and analyzing program data. These tasks must be performed while simultaneously demonstrating high-quality capabilities to teach, serve, and research. Much like the encumbered bricklayer, for the faculty member it is the carrying of the bricks (coordinating responsibilities) that produces the mental fatigue that makes it more difficult to build a straight, clean wall (research agenda) by the end of their probationary period. The new assistant professor/program coordinator who chooses to carry the appropriate quantity of bricks while still maintaining the quality, can successfully pave the way to long-term success in academia. On the other hand, those who do not wish to carry the minimum, or attempt to haul too many extraneous bricks, may find their career path diverge after their tenure hearing. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to discuss a) the dual role of the assistant professor/program coordinator, b) specific strategies for developing pre-tenure survival skills and c) leveraging the pseudo administrative duties of a program coordinator to forge a unique and diversified professional portfolio for leadership opportunities post-tenure.

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The Pre-Tenure Assistant Professor

The first year of a newly minted tenure-track professor can be both exhilarating and frightening as it is the onset of a new and exciting professional adventure. However, the tenure clock also begins to tick which can be overwhelming for these novices. Well before the first date of employment, new tenure-track faculty members are immersed in onboarding activities including: participating in new faculty orientations, attending college and department events, finalizing benefits paperwork, and obtaining a parking pass. Additionally, they must organize new office and lab spaces, prepare for a new teaching load, update syllabi, organize and deliver lessons during the first week of the semester, and meet and assign duties to graduate assistants and support staff (Merlo, 2016).

In addition to these basic onboarding activities and organizational duties, first-year assistant professors may be aggressively approached to serve on a myriad of department, college, and university committees. These duties are often a professional expectation and under the auspice of establishing a record of service towards tenure requirements (Ashcraft et al., 2021). As if these early expectations were not daunting enough, the enactment of their research agenda during this acclimation phase is likely to be the most crucial task of the pre-tenure assistant professor (Ashcraft et al., 2021; Ling & Ling, 2020; Mu & Hatch, 2020). It is in this area of the tenure process where carrying too many extraneous bricks may have an adverse effect on creating and sustaining a robust research agenda.

Although there are typically guidelines for tenure and promotion for each department and college within an institution, it has been noted that oftentimes "the rules of the game are ambiguous" (Merlo, 2016, p. 176) Novice assistant professors often rely on the advice and support of department chairs or other administrators and more experienced faculty members (Merlo, 2016). On the other hand, novices must also begin carving their path toward tenure based on their past professional endeavors and areas of interest. Assistant professors may also attempt to follow along with more experienced faculty members to learn from them through conferences, research projects, and publications. Some institutions offer formal or informal mentor programs that encourage this type of collaboration (Merlo, 2016), but novice assistant professors must rely on the more experienced professors to invite them to participate in their current work. As a result, these factors can set up a social structure that could be problematic (Ashcraft, 2021).

The Pre-Tenure Program Coordinator

Interpersonal skills are attractive and sought out characteristics when identifying and assigning program coordinator roles. Often, department chairs or college deans assign the program coordinator roles to faculty members, but on occasion the program coordinators are selected after a faculty vote. Incoming faculty members might also assume that coordinator roles are selected from existing faculty members who were not hired into the institution with a program coordinator designation. As a result, the administration may attempt to alleviate faculty members from the extraneous coordinating duties by allowing them to rotate the program coordinator roles amongst their departmental group, however, faculty members are often assigned to these roles due to the lack of potential candidates to do the job (Hackmann & Wanat, 2016).

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The program coordinator role is often an unofficial administrative position within the university, and a distinctive job description for the role may not always be clear. The responsibilities of coordinators can vary across institutions and the programs within them as described by Hackman & Wanat (2016) "facilitator, problem solver, or individuals who represent program interests" (p. 109). As the authors did not find that there is an actual standardized job description across all colleges and universities, they did find many examples of the academic bricks that program coordinators may carry in this rather undefined role: 1) determining potential marketing strategies and following through with the endeavors; 2) responding to program inquiries from potential candidates via email, phone, and virtual meetings; 3) accepting applications; 4) monitoring candidate progress throughout the program; 5) mediating student problems; 6) advising candidates on course selection and enrollment; 7) managing the students' culminating projects to successfully complete programs and graduate; 8) scheduling courses and teaching assignments; 9) hiring adjunct faculty members as needed; 10) overseeing the work of course instructors in the program (including adjuncts, full time temporary, tenure-track, and tenured faculty); 11) submitting accreditation reports; 12) making program and course improvements via all the necessary institutional approvals; and 13) developing and maintaining numerous collaboration partners from both internal and external organizations (Hackmann & Wanat, 2016; Ingle et al., 2018; Reames, 2016).

While some program coordinators receive monetary stipends (ranging from $5,000 to $9,000), the compensation for this pseudo administrative role is not always a financial one, as this work may be considered a service activity or may be substituted for course release time (Hackmann & Wanat, 2016; Ingle et al., 2018). The number of hours that program coordinators spend per week on coordinating duties has been reported by Hackmann and Wanat (2016) and estimated from 20 to 35 hours/week while Ingle et al. (2018) estimated about 17 hours/week. Whether through course release or stipends, compensation does not appear to correlate to the amount of time coordinators spend on administrative-related tasks (Hackmann & Wanat, 2016). Program coordinators/nontenured faculty members may also assume awkward hierarchal roles with their colleagues who are tenured faculty members, and the ambiguity of the program coordinators' leadership roles further exacerbates this problem (Hackmann & Wanat, 2016). As such, consistent and effective communication between the program coordinators and the department chairs and other administrators is necessary regarding such items as faculty workloads and course assignments.

Tenure Survivor to Superstar

The Metamorphosis

As the review of literature and discussion in this paper suggests, in many cases novice tenure-track professors are *thrown into the deep end of the pool* with regards to not only completing basic job functions such as setting up their offices, laboratories, and finding the copy machine, but also fulfilling essential work competencies such as course preparation and effective teaching, developing and executing a research agenda, and being asked to serve of a myriad of committees. This dynamic is eloquently outlined by Ingle et al. (2018) who stated:

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> With research productivity being a recognized proxy for merit at research institutions, time must be made for these activities. This provision is certainly important for tenure-track assistant professors who will find themselves unemployed if they do not meet institutional expectations to produce publications and grant submissions in sufficient numbers to increase the likelihood of earning tenure - all while providing effective instruction and evidence of service. (p. 181)

Therefore, for non-tenured faculty/program coordinators, the efficiency and effectiveness of completing these job expectations are paramount to surviving and thriving as successful tenure candidates (Merlo, 2016). Furthermore, these traits are also necessary for the novice to transform into a *superstar* in academia. As such, these brave individuals have a two-fold mission: maintaining a successful program and achieving promotion and tenure. Oftentimes, the duties of the program coordinator can supersede a faculty member's research agenda due to the amount of time that coordinating responsibilities consume (Hackmann & Wanat, 2016). Likewise, "faculty members may feel conflicted as they want to progress toward tenure and promotion yet are also accountable for program quality." (Ingle et al., 2018, p. 176). It is in this conflict where successful non-tenured program coordinators can demonstrate high efficiency in performing the same basic job functions as every other assistant professor while also possessing the administrative capabilities and leadership skills to grow and manage a successful program.

As will be discussed in the next section, pre-tenured program coordinators can leverage their experiences and accomplishments to not only elevate their program and institutional profile, but to also attain a higher level professionally if they desire. As with the master bricklayer, the key to success resides in the ability to carefully select the bricks that are the most important and helpful, while seeking support from other faculty members willing to take on some of the burden. When untenured program coordinators focus on the careful selection of tasks and the creation of support systems, they are building a foundation to balance their bricks and work smarter.

Create a Support Structure

Merlo (2016) provides an excellent variety of suggestions for pre-tenured faculty to survive the tenure process, but are these strategies enough to also carry the pre-tenured program coordinator across the finish line? As suggested by the premise and throughout this article, success is dependent on two important variables: 1) focusing on the appropriate tasks for personal development and program success and 2) seeking support and guidance from other professionals who are going through a similar process, or have successfully navigated those waters already. These individuals may reside within the department or can be found at professional conferences or continuing education events. In either case, creating a professional support structure is a key strategy for continued success (Mu & Hatch, 2020).

The support structure process begins by discovering faculty members who share similar work habits and educational philosophies. The novice faculty member can encourage professional relationship-building opportunities and capitalize on the assets of more experienced faculty members simply by volunteering to co-teach with them. Moreover, effective communication is necessary between all program coordinators and departmental

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chairs and other administrators. For example, interactive and symbiotic conversations between administration and faculty must occur before decisions are made about faculty workloads. The most beneficial relationship is between non-tenured professors and more experienced faculty, but there is also a shared interest between non-tenured faculty who are also program coordinators. This novice group of assistant professors/program coordinators can band together to share success stories, advocate for each other, offer helpful strategies for ways to improve programs, etc.

Work Smarter Not Harder

Non-tenured assistant professors/program coordinators must balance the required areas of teaching, research, and service effectively, hence merging practices in these three areas can be beneficial. For example, these faculty may choose to select research inquiries that relate to their teaching or service practices. There are also some pedagogical benefits to non-tenured assistant professors being assigned to program coordinator roles. For example, when coordinators directly interact with student-teacher candidates through program coordination duties, a sense of trust is fostered, and a mutually beneficial relationship can begin. This is especially helpful when the coordinator instructs these students in courses and/or if a problem arises during a candidate's course or program progression. Furthermore, online programs allow program coordinators and course instructors to build a community of learners that surpasses geographical constraints. This dynamic extends to the professional learning community at a critical time when educators desire support by providing program marketability to various regions, while potentially allowing more diverse research and service opportunities that the coordinator can leverage for promotion and tenure.

Experience Leads to Opportunity

Program coordinators can be motivated by intrinsic factors including a commitment to the program, a desire for program improvement, and a need to capitalize on their strengths to help the institution. This experience can also be an opportunity to train faculty members to be chairs or deans in the future (Hackmann & Wanat, 2016). The problem-solving part of the coordinating job can be rewarding. When given sufficient time to reflect on the needs of the students in the program, these faculty can identify future opportunities for program changes - this can also be leveraged to support future research endeavors, i.e., action research.

For those professionals seeking to advance their careers in academic administration, it is of the utmost importance to learn and develop the managerial, organizational, and leadership skills to not only prepare for administrative appointments, but to also meet the qualifications of national searches. Much like the qualities sought for selection to coordinator positions; department chairs, for example, must typically demonstrate a strong record of evolving administrative responsibilities, organizational skills, and program leadership and evaluation (Hackmann & Wanat, 2016). Obviously, these responsibilities increase in breadth and magnitude as administrators *move up the ladder* from department coordinator and chair positions to college dean and provost positions. If the novice program coordinators are seeking higher office in the future, they *must start somewhere*, and as

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discussed throughout this paper, the extensive job duties of program coordinators provide an excellent starting point for careers in higher-level academic administration.

Discussion and Conclusion

As mentioned previously, a newly hired assistant professor has lofty tasks ahead such as beginning a new job and paving a path toward tenure and promotion (James et al., 2021: Ling & Ling, 2020; Mu & Hatch, 2020). When the novice is also assigned to the added burden of program coordinator, it might be easy to feel overwhelmed. Although academia can be a difficult world to navigate, assistant professors should strive to keep improving as they increase their knowledge and skills, where each semester brings new chances to improve (Merlo, 2016). Newly minted assistant professors/program coordinators have several types of bricks to work with (coordinating tasks as well as tasks to achieve tenure), therefore, they must carefully select the appropriate quantity of bricks to carry while still maintaining the quality of each type. By focusing on improving practice with a few basic tips, assistant professors/program coordinators can move from *survival* to *superstar* status. Some of these simple strategies include: leaning on colleagues they can trust for moral support as well as opportunities to collaborate on teaching, research, and service endeavors. Other strategies include mentoring opportunities with tenured faculty members as well as nontenured colleagues who share similar workloads. If the assistant professor/program coordinator can learn to maintain a work-life balance and merge the three areas of work (teaching, research, and service), these superstar faculty may build a successful brick wall for tenure as well as program success.

Future opportunities in empirical research in this area abound as mentioned by Hackmann and Wanat (2016), where there is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that program coordinators in colleges of education serve a vital role to their students, department, and institution. However, little research has been conducted to examine the characteristics of this role, or the toll this added responsibility takes on nontenured and tenured faculty members alike. The premise behind this editorial was to provide a thorough review of the existing literature regarding this organizational dynamic and to add the authors' personal experiences and strategies for other professionals attempting to navigate the tenure process while also serving in program coordinator roles. Therefore, the logical next step in the process would be to gather baseline data qualitatively and quantitatively to determine empirically if program coordination serves as a barrier or a door to earning tenure and promotion. Moreover, if the strategies suggested in this piece have a significant impact on professional effectiveness, and based on the efficacy of future findings, samples may then be broadened across several college and education populations and eventually to multiple disciplines. As faculty, we are charged with developing new leaders in education, and to do this effectively, we must first examine the new *brick wall* that resides in our own backyard.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

As this was a thought piece based on the experience of the authors as well as a review of the current literature, there were no conflicts of interest between the authors and this work.

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Human Participants

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