Notes on Setting up and growing a research program new faculty orientation panel

Jeff Chang, Botany and Plant Pathology

I wish I had known---you do not get grants to publish papers, you publish papers to get grants. Our job is to help people, to make everyone better but we are not trained to interact with people---big challenge for some, especially around managing people. You want to appear to be treating everyone equally, but because of different skills and needs you do not treat everyone the same---they all need something different. Figuring that out is challenging. You need to figure out what kind of culture do you want in your lab when you hire people---then think about the personalities that will fit into that culture and try to hire folks for that. Then, you will need to adjust some depending on who you actually get (i.e., turning a poorly performing student into a great outcome).

Jennifer Field, Environmental and Molecular Toxicology

I concur with Jeff that we are not trained to deal with people effectively. We need to respect the individual and help folks accommodate their differences. Speaking from College P&T perspective--remember to look at your Position Description—what does it say? Is it still relevant? Have that conversation with your supervisor or department head. Manage your time with respect to service. Get advice---use a combination of input, mentoring committees, colleagues, etc. The funding climate is always changing. Is it getting chilly...there are waivers, always has been, but collaboration might be one way to deal with a patchwork of funding. It is always a balancing act across duties. Teaching duties---we now have wonderful resources across campus (Center for Teaching and Learning)---use them! Go early, go often. You will be rewarded for trying.

Clint Epps, Fisheries and Wildlife

The funding and research landscape for everyone is different. We are not well trained in budgeting and navigating hiring paperwork/processes. Learned how to do this! There are multiple funding sources; don’t rely on a single source. I was not successful with NSF at first and needed to move to other funding sources (Federal, state, tribal agencies)—need to have strategies in mind about how you would work together with folks from different funding sources. Think about the components of a research project--how do you support a student or a post-doc or is an FRA more appropriate. Look for opportunities to staff/complete projects in multiple ways (student volunteers, hourly employees, GRAs, post-doc, etc.). Make an effort to get to know the people in the business center who can help you figure these things out and help you think about alternatives. Everyone has too much to do...develop allies. It is nice to have 2-3 big grants, but be prepared to adapt.

Discussion
From a budget standpoint think of people as modules (i.e., GRA, post-doc, etc.).

Q&A

I am cautious by nature. I have submitted grants, but none have come in yet. Do I hire on a student before I have long term funding. How do you balance risks vs getting started?

Remember, it is a start-up not an endowment. Research is a lot like business investments--You have to spend money to make money. Getting graduate students is a wise investment---most departments would not let a student fail. If the money is not there, they can get a GTA; that is not the case if your FRA or post-doc funds run out—they are gone. However, Students are risky, it is a long train to get a publication out of a student. However, getting students out looks good on P&T and is an expectation of some departments—ask the department head or P&T Committee. PhD students might take 5 yrs or more----you need to ask yourself, can I get one out the door before tenure decision? MS students often a better bet. Your first student is very important because students talk to one another. You need to identify people who are flexible.

Boundaries with graduate students? Your advisor is your advisor; where I came from if you really needed help you went to graduate student friends. Seems like students these days don’t know where the boundaries are.

It changes over your career...as you age you are older and older compared to them but you also develop strategies for working more effectively with graduate students. If you give them your cell-phone number make sure they know when it is OK to call you (For example, only during normal working hours unless it is an experience, or daily if they are in the field and you need to know they are safe. Clint has developed a document setting out expectations. Some people thrive with more formality while others need less. People need to be comfortable enough to come to you if they need help. Be consistent and maintain regular hours (not at night or on weekends unless it is an emergency). Be your authentic self, but remember, you are not their buddy. Full transparency is important----I am doing this because...I am giving you my phone number because...

Need to publish papers to get grants---explain

The publication is an indication of your creditability and in some cases you have to document you can do something or work on some organisms before a granting agency will invest in you. Remember, and remind students that manuscripts are the currency for your students’ next positions.

Questions related to “numbers” and P&T---if you have extension/research background, what is the balance for scholarship in one area vs the other.

On the extension side, you need to develop your clientele---they will provide an assessment for your P&T regarding your impact. Extension is largely about documenting impact and
interactions among people and clientele. Have a conversation with your department head and the P&T committee about expectations.

*What kind of habits or skills to you have to keep up with the scholarship?*

Publish everything you have---get it out—you should be accountable to the public/funding agency. Make your students accountable for that as well, and don’t let them write a thesis that is not close to being ready for publication. Look for ways to make is easier for your students because many really struggle with writing. Look for students with strong writing skills. The problem with scholarship, there are no deadlines for publications---you must set your own! Bottom-up or top down (big idea) publications.....get some bottom up publications. Write every day! Don’t open email or answer the phone before 10:00 or whatever is a pattern where you can write effectively everyday. Don’t let someone else’s emergency distract you unless it is really your emergency. Look for opportunities to collaborate with others---it often helps to have a co-author pushing you to get stuff back and vice versa. I have a sticky note on papers by stage on my desktop—I see it and update it all the time. Remember to get it out---it is never going to be perfect.

How do I deal with unexpected outcomes (geese eating pastures, chickens stolen).

You need to learn to be adaptable. Very few experiments work out as planned, and some are total losses. But, having several going in different places may reduce the risk of a catastrophic failure of an experiment (i.e., burned up, drought, animal damage, equipment failure, etc.)

*Lots of conversation/discussion about life-work balance*

These are difficult jobs and many in our fields are type A personalities and do not know when/how to stop. You need to plan carefully and work on being as efficient with your time as possible. Learn to say NO! You need to keep life-work-balance in mind. This job is not worth it if you lose your spouse over it (not uncommon after tenure), or if your kid gets through grade school and you have really engaged in their growing up. Put a sticky tab on your computer—“No one ever looks back and says ‘I wished I had spent more time at work!’”