



## Making a Strong Start on Your Campus

*Linda Russell*

We didn't have enough room in the book, *Designing Effective Teaching and Significant Learning*, for everything we wanted to share with faculty. We are including this additional chapter to assist you with your professional development.

### Learning Outcomes

Our hope is that, by the end of, this article you will be able to:

- Describe the basic culture of your department and its norms.
- List the key people/positions that you need to get access to copying, technical assistance and supplies.
- Name the supports for faculty, such as centers for teaching /learning, new faculty groups, or mentoring programs.

### Points to Ponder

- I've already taught for several years, so what do I still have to learn about how a campus works?
- I'm very new to teaching. How will my new campus help me?
- I'm switching from a four-year university to a two-year college (or vice-versa); what challenges will I face?

Rose had just joined the faculty at City College as a new full-time instructor. She already had several years of college teaching experience, and even had taught at City for a few semesters as an adjunct. She was delighted to have a more secure position! Quickly, however, she discovered that as a "permanent" faculty member, her department and her dean had expectations for her that were demanding on her time and plunged her into some controversial situations. For example, she had previously published papers on LGBTQ student success and discrimination, and her dean wanted her on a committee that was looking into the problem at City. Also, her department asked her to chair a committee that evaluated writing portfolios—a very time intensive role. These two high demand committees competed with her teaching two new courses. It finally took its toll on her mid-fall semester when yet another administrator called her to join the accreditation task force to represent her department. "It's just too much!" she cried (real tears). "But I'm new here; how can I say no?"



Rose met with her CTL leaders halfway through her first semester at City College, just about the time she reached her breaking point. She was so relieved when they told her that she could “just say no” to requests to be on task forces and committees. They gave her some ideas as to how to decline without jeopardizing her relationships with her department or her supervisors. For example, one way to decline is to put it off, “I’m sorry that I can’t do this now, but I’d be interested next fall [or next term].” For the request to chair a committee, they coached her to offer to sit on the committee for her first year, but not to chair it. These two small changes allowed her to take control of her priorities and reduced her stress levels.

## **Balancing Responsibilities**

These are very real concerns for faculty who are new to an institution. What is your primary role? How can you adjust to new courses, new campus, and new colleagues and also be expected to jump onto committees or take on new research responsibilities? How can you be good at everything?

In order to provide top notch learning environments for your students, so that they can reach the goals you have for your courses, you need to take care of yourself too. You may have years of teaching experience or hardly any. In either case, changing schools or taking on a new status (such as full time, rather than adjunct), you will have new adjustments, new roles, perhaps new colleagues and students. As a new faculty member, there are many things to learn about your campus that will affect your ability to teach well. Thus, we offer some important steps you can take to get to know your new college and manage your competing demands.

## **Names and Labels**

Every campus seems to have its own titles for positions, so it’s sometimes hard to find the right person to assist you if you don’t know their title or the name of their department. Some colleges call Vice Presidents Provosts, and vice versa. Some campuses use acronyms and forget to tell newcomers what they stand for. Most campuses have an organizational chart that you can look at, which may be housed in a shared online folder or internal web page. The sooner you know the players, the smoother your transition will be.

## **Departmental Culture**

As a new faculty member, you will be joining a department, division, or program. Just as in any new job, it will behoove you to learn the culture of that group so that you can function well in its decisions and operations. This is the team you need to work well with, get support from, and get permission from should you wish to propose new courses or changes to the curriculum. Tips to make a strong start with your new team are:

- Find out how meetings are run. Usually led by a chairperson, but also influenced by the power mongers in the department, these meetings will give you a glimpse into the general



norms of the group. Do they vote on decisions? Use Robert's Rules for meetings? Are they more of a consensus making group? Does everyone speak up? Are there obvious factions? How do they choose who teaches which courses?

- Observe for a while so that you can at least understand how they operate. Ask your chairperson how to get something on the agenda for discussion.
- Find an ally in the group that you can ask questions of (probably not the chair, who does have power over you and your schedule). Even something as mundane as “how do I contribute to the coffee fund” can cause friction and is worth paying attention to.

## How to Get Things Done

An immediate need for you as a classroom instructor will be learning how things get done on your campus.

- *Copies:* If you need copies of materials, tests, and the like, how do you order them? What is the usual turn-around time? Is the copy service reliable, or are they notorious for messing things up (in which case, always provide lots more time than is required so you can check everything and order a re-do if needed). If you have an “emergency” copy order, will they honor it? Can you make your own copies somewhere? Be aware that copy services are required to follow strict copyright procedures (and permissions), so if you submit materials that appear to be copyrighted, they may not make your copies unless you provide the appropriate permission.
- *Technical Assistance:* You will likely need IT to help you gain access to email, online platforms, phone systems and voicemail, class lists, and student information systems (if allowed). What is the procedure you should follow to get this help? Is there an office to visit, a helpdesk person to call, or a form to fill out? How do you get your job into the queue?
- *Supplies:* You also might need supplies that the department or school would provide. Chalk or white board markers, pens, and paper are all things your department may budget for. Your department chair or administrative assistant, if there is one, could help you find the things you need. If you need more program-related special supplies, ask what the procedure is for ordering them, and what the budget will allow.

### Bright Idea

Create a cheat sheet for the main numbers/contacts you need for your basic supplies and services. Learn the names of the people who will be assisting you, and make sure they know you appreciate their work.—Linda Russell



## **Organizing and Communicating Strategies**

Most campuses communicate by email, and there could be a lot of emails in your inbox immediately. You need a system for sorting and organizing them so you don't miss an important one. Also, you'll want to follow the conventions of email that your college or department uses, if any. For example, use a signature on your email that automatically populates when you send any email to anyone. Put your full name, title and phone number(s) in it so if you send an email to recipients who are temporarily away from campus, they will have your phone number handy if they need to respond by phone. Your dean will thank you for this! If you aren't too sure about using features such as the signature in email, then sign up for some training as soon as you can.

Handling an onslaught of emails is more difficult, but will be easier if you keep a few things in mind. First, find out how much email will your system accumulate and when are old messages deleted. Somewhere in your email instructions it should tell you your inbox limit and the timeline for items to remain there. Also, check to see where your archived emails are stored so you are sure that they are permanently saved. Second, use some kind of system for sorting and prioritizing emails. Folders can be set up for your different courses, for any committees, for communicating with your dean or department, or other group. An email training session will teach you how to set up a rule, so that emails can automatically be sent to the appropriate folder if you'd like it to be streamlined. Or you can just put them in the folders after you read them. Flagging for items you need to respond to or follow up on can be helpful, as is color coding. You might like to set aside a particular time of day during which you handle emails and check on any that require attention.

There will likely be ebbs and flows of emails during a semester that you can plan for. The very beginning tends to be busy with mail about all campus information, and the end tends to be full of students who "need" something from you prior to finishing up. We feel that your first priority is student email. Be sure to require students to identify the course they are in using the subject line, and to identify themselves with first and last names in the body of the email. If there are common questions across many students, you can use your course management system to email an entire class at one time, saving you a lot of duplicative notes. Your syllabus should inform students that you will respond to emails within a certain time frame (e.g., within 24 hours).

## **Resources for Faculty**

Find out if there is a Faculty Association of some kind, such as a union. It is important to know who your representatives are in case you would require their assistance (if a student complains about you, for example). There is likely one meeting per semester that you can attend, or at least get minutes from so you know what is going on. You will be asked to join, if it is a union, and it is your choice to join or not (although you will pay "fair share dues" if you decline).



Disciplinary policies and procedures for students are helpful to know, and it is very important to know all of the levels of intervention a student might encounter before deciding to escalate. For example, one college automatically suspends a student while an “investigation” of a conduct violation is in progress. Students may be suspended for up to nine days, even if they may ultimately be found in compliance (innocent). In that case, it may be best to save the formal procedure for only very serious infractions, as the suspension can cause havoc for the student in all classes.

That said, you may have student behavior concerns, and you should try to speak with someone about them. If you have a Center for Teaching and Learning or designated faculty leaders who function as resources for faculty development, contact them and ask for help. They will have tips and suggestions that could alleviate the situation. Do not be embarrassed about asking for this help; they want you to succeed and provide the best learning environment for both students and faculty. They will also help you determine if what you’re experiencing is a serious matter best handled by the disciplinary process, or if it is best handled by you, with improved skills and their assistance.

Bookstore procedures, through which you order your texts and materials, may be handled by your department chair (for multi-section courses), or may have been ordered for you when you start, but you may need to get the order in for your second term. Find out your department’s stance on individuals ordering texts for multi-section courses before you launch out on your own. Also consider that many students want to use financial aid for books, so if you use a third party seller or Amazon, they will have to find another way to make the transaction. If you do order your own choice of texts, consider things like cost and reading level appropriate for your course level and student population. There are options such as Open Educational Resources, which are free, but first make sure they are the appropriate level and scope for your course, well written and proofed, and that all your students have access to them (some are online or pdf and might require large bandwidth or computer memory).

### **Mentoring for new faculty**

Some campuses offer mentoring services as part of a Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). If you are relatively new to teaching or new to the campus, a mentor might be extremely helpful. We suggest a mentor from outside your department. An outsider will be disconnected from your tenure process and neutral about how you fit into your department. He or she will not have any power over you that a departmental colleague might have. There are many different models for mentorship, so before signing up, find out what each person’s expected contributions will be, how much time it will consume, and the degree to which the relationship will benefit you.

In addition to mentoring, some CTL’s will offer short-term groups for faculty, such as book groups, teaching circles, or discussion groups on various topics. If you feel you have time, these



are wonderful ways to meet faculty from outside your department and to focus on topics that enhance your teaching.

### **Serving on Committees or other service to the College**

Although faculty are often expected to provide service to the college, and perhaps to the larger community, as a new employee, do not get too involved in activities outside of your departmental responsibilities during the first semester or year. Take some time to learn about the options you have and how they match your interests and skills. Stay away from controversial committees, such as Governance, Accreditation, and Academic Council or Curriculum until you are established and finished with your probationary period. Depending on your skill set, you may be asked to sit on committees, but do take enough time and study to choose the right one that will not derail you from your primary responsibilities or take too much time as you begin your new position. It is acceptable to decline such requests by simply saying, "I will consider that later, but not right now."

### **Keep track of your activities**

However you decide to become involved on campus, whether it is joining a teaching circle, signing up for a mentor, advising a student group, or working on a special project, make sure to keep a record of it. When you are evaluated, these kinds of activities should be listed among your accomplishments for the year. Some might be considered "Service to the college," or "Service to the Community." Others might be "faculty development," which implies that you are eager to improve your teaching skills or expertise in your field. Some campuses are quite formal about reporting activities, and others are not, so take the lead on this so that your dean is well informed about all of your work, not just the courses you have taught. In fact, at any time, you may send your dean a quick email about one of the things you have done, just as a FYI. He or she will appreciate knowing what you are up to, especially if there is a decision lying ahead about whether to keep you or let you go.

### **Advising Responsibilities**

In some institutions faculty serve as advisors to students in addition to their other responsibilities. Ask if there is an advising handbook that will help you understand your role and its limits. Find out if you are expected to use the student record system to enter your meetings with advisees, track student progress through the program/curriculum, or provide any other recordkeeping. You might need a training session to learn to use such a system, as well as permission to access it. Remember that any student data is confidential, so be very careful to log out of the system each time you step away from your computer.

### Bright Idea

There may be an online advising tool at your college that makes it easier to track student progress, provides all necessary forms and requirements for the major or program. Using that will allow you more time to meet and get to know your advisees, rather than just handing them forms and going over lists.—*Zala Fashant*

If you advise students within your department or program, it won't take long for you to become knowledgeable about the pathways, prerequisites, and other requirements for students. However, if you are a "generalist," you won't necessarily know about all possible majors, programs, or policies. There should be both training and some kind of documentation (handbook or policy descriptions) available for you. Good advice is to help the student take responsibility for knowing his/her own pathway, requirements, rules, and recordkeeping methods for tracking progress. Teach the student how to do this in your first visit, and then you won't be the one doing all the work.

Advisors are not counselors. You don't suddenly become a therapist when you take on advising, but there are many times that students share information about problems they are having with both teachers and advisors. The next section of this article lists many resources for students. Familiarize yourself with your campus resources so that you can refer students to the appropriate service when necessary. You don't need to be the primary problem solver, but you can be the conduit to good assistance.

### Resources for Students

Every campus has a myriad of services for students. You'll be familiar with some, but each campus offers unique amenities based on their students' needs. Although you cannot learn about all of them instantly, you can focus on finding out what is available for students that has relevance for your students or advisees. Here is a brief list of typical services. They operate under different names, so look at the descriptions and find a match on your campus.

- Learning Centers (for tutoring and other learning support; may be peer tutors),
- Supplemental Instruction (a learning support group review),
- Testing Centers (for assessment/placement testing, and perhaps for make-up testing when students miss a test),
- Accessibility Services (to determine appropriate accommodations for students with physical or learning challenges; do check this out so you have any required statements on your syllabus regarding accommodations),
- Veterans Services (to ease the transition into college and provide advising and support),
- Specific centers for subgroups of students, some of which may offer advising, tutoring, and other supports (Native American, African American, Latinx students, Muslim students, LGBTQ students, and others),
- TRiO services (a Federally funded support program for eligible students),



- Honors programs,
- Counseling and emergency services (is there a hotline phone number? Do they help students with mental health issues?)
- Other? Check your campus listings.

You may even list some resources on your syllabus with appropriate locations and phone numbers. When you have time, stop in to each place and introduce yourself, take a tour, and find out how your students can access and benefit from the services of each resource.

### Reflecting on this Article

List any remaining questions you have about your campus. Then find out the person you need to contact to get the answer to each question. See the Action Checklist as you think about what you need to know in your new position.

### Action Checklist

<b>Getting Started on Your Campus Checklist</b>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Practical Logistics</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	I know how to order copies.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I know whom to contact about IT issues.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I know where to get basic supplies.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Resources</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have visited the library.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have visited the service offices that are pertinent my students, such as a Learning Center.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am aware of faculty services such as a CTL.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have emergency phone numbers (e.g. security) in my phone and handy when I'm teaching.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Culture and Structure of Campus</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	I know where to find an organizational chart of my campus.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have information about a faculty association (e.g. union or other)
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have a copy of my hiring contract.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have read at least pertinent parts of the teaching contract for the campus.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I know the procedures for registering a complaint (e.g. about student misconduct).