Some Advice on Pursuing Research and Scholarship at a Regional Campus

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We have been warned in many maxims about the dangers of offering and taking advice. Here are a few of my favorites:

> "I always pass on good advice. It is the only thing to do with it. It is never of any use to oneself." --Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*

> "The trouble with advice is that it's usually something you don't want to hear." --Charles De Lint, *The Onion Girl*

> "Advice is more agreeable in the mouth than in the ear." --Mason Cooley, *City Aphorisms*

> "Free advice is often overpriced." --E. C. Mckenzie, *Mac's Giant Book Of Quips & Quotes*

> "The people sensible enough to give good advice are usually sensible enough to give none." --Eden Phillpotts, Attributed, *Reader's Digest*, 1951

In writing this article, I am obviously choosing to ignore most of these nuggets of advice about giving advice. But, then again, one can argue that the maxims themselves violate the truths that they state, simply by expressing those truths.

I hope that I am still young enough that the following quotation does not apply to me: "The counsels of the old, like the winter sun, shine, but give no heat." (Luc De Clapiers, Marquis De Vauvenargues, *Reflections And Maxims*). (I acknowledge that using the phrase "young enough" may be ambiguous in all respects except that it very clearly suggests that, however old the writer is, he or she is not "young.")

The one piece of advice that I will promise to follow comes from Oscar Wilde: "Whatever advice you give, be brief." (But I will add the caveat

that promises are generally kept even less frequently than advice is followed.)

Let me start by providing a concise personal profile that may in itself allow you to decide whether it is worth your while to read further. I have been teaching at a regional campus for almost 25 years. I was promoted to associate professor with tenure after my fifth year and to full professor after my ninth year. I do not have a national or even a regional reputation as a scholar. But in terms of items in the major bibliographic indexes in my discipline, I have produced a volume of work equal in quantity to the most productive faculty in my discipline on our university's main campus. I very willingly acknowledge, however, that several of those colleagues have regularly placed work with some of the leading journals in their areas of specialty and that I have not done so. I have served many years on both my college promotion and tenure committee and on our university promotion and tenure committee. I have also written external promotion and tenure reviews for more than three dozen faculty at other institutions, and I have served as a manuscript reviewer for a half-dozen journals in my field. In short, I think that I can credibly judge the value of a candidate's scholarship because I have a credible sense of the value of my own scholarly contributions: that is, my record of scholarship is very strong for faculty member at a regional-campus, but more solid than truly exceptional in any broader sense. If you have aspirations that are considerably higher than those that have driven my scholarship, you may wish to solicit advice from someone with more stature. Nonetheless, some of the following advice may still prove useful, especially at the front-end of your career.

1. Before you listen to any advice, from anyone, take the time to read the contract, the college and department bylaws, and any other formal guidelines that spell out expectations related not only to your scholarship but also to your teaching and service.

   In the end, it does not matter what anyone may have told you or failed to tell you about those expectations. It is your responsibility to be thoroughly knowledgeable about what is expected of you. Your document will be reviewed, page to page, against what is in the documents that define institutional expectations.

Whatever the minimum expectations are, you should absolutely make certain that you meet them, to the letter. Doing so will insure that a strong case will need to be made against your candidacy for it to be rejected. Not doing so means that you have provided a ready rationale for rejecting your candidacy to anyone who wishes, whether out of a heightened sense of fairness or malice, to make a case against it.

So, if the departmental or college guidelines that apply to you state that you need to have published "four refereed scholarly articles in reputable journals related to your discipline," then you should, in a very systematic and determined way, produce work of suitable merit to journals of sufficient stature in your discipline. Some journals have obvious stature. To determine the stature of a less widely known journal, check first the major annual bibliographies in your discipline to see if the journal is indexed and then the World Catalogue to see how many libraries worldwide carry the journal.

If you think that your best work is good enough to be considered by the top-ranked journals, submit it to them. That sort of prestigious publication obviously carries a great deal of weight that may help to cancel out any deficiencies elsewhere. But recognize that the review process for manuscripts typically is more extended in proportion to how competitive journals are, simply because everyone recognizes the value of placing work in the most prestigious journals. I believe, for instance, that *PMLA* (the journal of the Modern Language Association) receives about 2,000 manuscripts each year and accepts about 20 of them. So, not only does the editorial staff have to process an extremely large number of both manuscripts and reviewers' comments, but the process of making final selections among the best of those many submissions is certain to be very difficult and therefore more extended.

Recognize, too, that, in contrast to the sometimes painfully slow review process, the probationary period passes very quickly. So it is very prudent to submit some work to reputable but less competitive journals so that you reach the required minimum number of publications well ahead of submitting your application for promotion and tenure.

2. Because most minimums are stated very clearly in terms of quantitative requirements but leave more room for judgments to be made on the qualitative side, make certain that your record includes items well beyond the required minimum of core items.

   These additional items do not need to be of the same quality as the core items. Their main purpose is to discourage qualitative cases against those core items and to allow a great deal of room for counter-arguments among those who support your candidacy. For instance, a concern may be expressed about the quality of one of your core publications—because of where it has been published, because of its focus or scope, because of it originality, or simply because of its length. If your record also includes three or four book reviews in scholarly journals, someone can counter that the book reviews may compensate for any perceived weaknesses in a particular core item.

   Somewhat later in this piece, I will offer some more specific suggestions on the types of things, beyond book reviews in scholarly journals, that might enhance your record of scholarship. But, more broadly, the value to you of these pieces should be determined, at least in part, by the degree of time and effort required to complete them.

3. Everyone who has graduated from a doctoral program should have gained a fairly good sense of the sorts of topics that are addressed in the standard scholarship in the discipline. But regional-campus faculty frequently express frustration about the impediments to their pursuit of that sort of scholarship. Measured in comparison to what is available to faculty at the main campuses, these impediments might range from the competing demands created by higher teaching loads and service expectations to a lack of adequate laboratories or graduate assistants, to the much more limited collegial give and take on scholarly topics due to the smaller or even single-person departments at the regional campuses.

In most institutions, however, these impediments are actually taken into account and some allowances are made in terms of the scholarly expectations of regional-campus faculty.

For instance, because of the higher teaching loads and the greater emphasis therefore placed on the quality of teaching, regional-campus faculty are generally given greater leeway in focusing on teaching-related scholarship. An increasing number of journals focus on successful and innovative classroom strategies and practices.

Although many new faculty may be hesitant to advertise their failures, most of these journals will also welcome, if not advertise their interest in, articles that examine the reasons for failed strategies of practices. If a candidate has had any issues raised about the quality of his or her teaching, this sort of article is very risky. It may not only provide detailed documentation of the author's inadequacies in the classroom, but it may also suggest that the candidate is paradoxically exploiting those inadequacies to personal advantage. On the other hand, if a candidate has a strong teaching record, this sort of publication may serve to reinforce the enthusiasm, imagination, and determination with which he or she has approached those responsibilities.

I once did two conference presentations and a resulting article on a special topic that I had developed for a second-semester English composition course that focused on argument and research methods. The presentations and article were greeted with enthused praise by the conference participants and the journal editor. The approach to the special topic that the presentations and article detailed was repeatedly declared to be "ingenious." But, perhaps very predictably, the topic failed miserably. In fact, it failed so miserably that after waiting a year for the bad word of mouth to die down, I tried it again, rationalizing that so many people could not have been so wrong about its merits and that it must have needed just "a little tweaking." The second time around, I recognized that it was a completely unsalvageable idea about a month ahead of my students, which made the whole experience exponentially harder for me to bear. Nonetheless, once I got over reading the rather

devastating student evaluations from the course, I wrote an article that examined the reasons for the failure of the topic and the strategy for presenting it. It was a very eye-opening experience. In the end, I wondered how I, and everyone who had greeted the idea with such unabashed enthusiasm, could have missed the manifold potential pitfalls in it. The resulting article was almost immediately accepted by the first journal to which I submitted it. The reviewers' comments were more generous than I ever could have expected, citing in particular the sense of humor that I exhibited in describing a painful failure. The article has since been reprinted four times, and in each instance, it has generated more e-mails from readers than anything else that I have written. Failure sometimes resonates much more profoundly than success.

The proliferation of alternative means of delivering course content has created almost endless possibilities to explore and to document new teaching strategies. If you have a strong teaching record, try something new--but not anything too radically new. Approach opportunities incrementally so that they do not become time sinks. Plan ahead, with scholarly publication in mind. Make sure that you define goals, collect data, and assess outcomes. And keep an ongoing log of anecdotal material. It will keep the resulting article(s) from being too dry.

4. Beyond articles on teaching strategies and practices, consider how you might transfer your mastery of the content of the courses that you are teaching into scholarship. In the process of preparing our classes and sometimes in the midst of a class, we all generate fresh insights into the material, beyond anything provided in instructor's guides or the relevant scholarship. At the very least, these insights can be turned into the scholarly notes that many journals still publish. With a little patience and imagination, they can be combined with other insights to provide the basis for full-length articles.

   In teaching an interdisciplinary Honors seminar on "The Mafia and the Mafia Film," I came across a section in a "companion" volume to *The Godfather*, detailing how the color orange recurs throughout the film either in or just ahead of violent scenes. Apparently, Francis

Ford Coppola was not consciously aware of the pattern in the original film, but once it was noticed by several reviewers, he deliberately extended it through the second and third films in the trilogy. Almost immediately, I thought of two instances in literary works in which something orange immediately preceded or figured in violent acts. I made some notes and over the next five or six years, I expanded the list of illustrations from literary works until I had enough for a substantial article.

5. Don't overlook materials that literally or figuratively pass right under your nose.

I recently read an article that described "digital hoarders," and I realized that it described me. In broader terms, I am something of a pack rat, though I do periodically "purge" the accumulation of "stuff" in my university office and home study. For the most part, that "stuff" consists of boxes of files—research materials, course folders, student work, and mail that I have decided to hold onto "temporarily." About three years ago, I decided to keep only electronic copies of the first three categories of this "stuff." (So most of what is now stacked in my office and study has been there for more than three years. Clearly my sense of the word "periodically' may differ from yours.) But the downside to this shift to electronic copies has been that my folders in Windows Explorer have multiplied with a rapidity as startling as the melting of the polar ice.

But if you can manage to be systematic and efficient (that is, if you don't spend far more time saving materials than working with them), the advantage of this approach is that you will never be at a loss for ideas. Your idea file will overfloweth.

Before spam filters became more efficient, we used to get inundated with those solicitous e-mails from the Nigerian fund-transfer scammers (so-called because the scam originated and persist in Nigeria, though it has become international). I found the variations in the e-mails strangely fascinating and started to save them, giving each file a five-digit number, starting with 00001.htm. Ultimately, I accumulated over 6,700 of the messages in an

electronic folder. When I saw a CFP for a special journal issue on textual analyses of electronic-specific documents, I submitted an abstract that was accepted. The resulting article, "A Rhetorical Analysis of Fund-Transfer Scam E-Mails," appeared in the French journal *Cercles*. When I received my contributor's copy, I was truly startled to discover that the other contributors were uniformly affiliated with some of the most prestigious major research institutions in the U.S. and Europe. It remains one of the most prestigious journal publications on my record.

My discipline is English. Note that I slanted the previously described article to a discipline-related topic. *Cercles* focuses on topics in the arts and sciences, and more specifically on topics that bridge the arts and sciences. I similarly collected articles on Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, intending to teach an Honors seminar on the topic. But when the journal *Space and Culture*, which originates in Canada, advertised a special issue on natural disasters and urban areas, I submitted an article on the limits to the recurring analogy made between Katrina's impact on New Orleans and the impact of the 1905 earthquake on San Francisco. Although the journal has a clear focus in the social sciences, my article had a clear rhetorical slant that made it pointedly relevant to my discipline.

6. Take opportunities to present at conferences, but make sure that you write a complete draft of each paper before attending the conference. Going back to draft a paper after you have made a presentation from an outline is somehow much more difficult. Faculty often rationalize that they will be able to incorporate feedback into the paper if they write it afterwards, but unless someone suggests a very different basic approach to the topic, there is nothing that would preclude them from incorporating such feedback into a completed draft. Having a lengthy list of conference presentations and relatively few scholarly publications ends up reflecting negatively on a candidate because the contrast provokes the question of why more of the presentations did not lead to publications—and it may even suggest a general lack of substance in the presentations.

Moreover, it is worthwhile to look for the increasing number of conference panels that are linked to special journal issues or even collections of scholarly articles.

7. With some reasonable restraint, periodically resubmit to journals that have accepted your work. Even if you have not established a broader scholarly reputation, the editor will recognize you as a former contributor and may decide in your favor if the reviewers' recommendations are mixed.

8. Consider contributing to reference volumes, in particular specialized reference volumes on topic related to your discipline. Because they are being published electronically, as well as in paper, they have escaped the digital winnowing that has dramatically reduced the number of general encyclopedias being published, either electronically or conventionally. These entries are generally 250 to 1,000 words long, and they require limited--or perhaps more accurately, concentrated—research. So they can be completed relatively efficiently. Although they will generally not be considered the equivalent of journal articles, they will nicely accent a record that includes just the minimum number of journal articles.

   There are at least three other advantages to doing reference articles. First, they will keep you writing during periods when you are focused on collecting or reading research materials for other, broader projects. Second, they will often suggest topics for journal articles that would not have occurred to you otherwise. Third, because the editors of these volumes often take on one project after another, contributing to one volume often opens opportunities to contribute to other volumes. In some instances, an editor may switch between reference volumes and collections of scholarly articles, contributions to which do often count as the equivalent of journal articles, especially if the publisher or series is highly regarded.

   I have worked with a fairly large number of editors, and some have subsequently approached me about contributing to volumes on topics well outside my discipline. I have a second BA in history; so I have not hesitated to take on assignments for volumes on historical

topics, as long as they are not intended for very specialized audiences. I have also contributed to a fairly large number of volumes on topics related to popular culture and current events.

In several instances, I have accepted an assignment well outside my expertise simply to challenge myself. (I do not recommend that untenured professors do this.) In one instance, an editor of a set of reference volumes on modern drama, published by a major university press, could not find an person to write an essay on Pakistani drama. She had originally wanted a 3000-word article but was now willing to settle for a 1000- to 1500-word article and expressed a willingness to accept whatever I could produce related to the topic. After about a month of the most inventive research that I have ever undertaken, I produced a 3,000-word article on Pakistani drama, as well as a handful of 500-word profiles of individual Pakistani dramatists.

In several other instances, however, I expended a great deal of effort on assignments for which I could not find a focus or a slant that satisfied the editor. As is the case with journals, some editors are simply easier to work with or easier to understand than others, and often it is not an absolute sort of thing but, instead, more a matter of how the editor's sensibility or communication style meshes with the contributor's.

9. If you can make the time to do so, consider contributing to newspapers, general periodicals, and blogs. Beyond the fact that this sort of writing will generally count as service, it is a way to connect with people with similar interests and, more specifically, a way to connect with other professionals in your discipline working outside of academia--and even an additional way, outside of the usual academic networks, to connect with other academics in your discipline. Moreover, beyond the very likely possibility that this writing may generate additional, fresh ideas for serious scholarship, if the publications are regional or national, rather than local, contributing to them may generate offers from editors looking for contributions to multi-disciplinary special journal issues or collections of articles. This sort of writing will certainly help to

prevent your academic writing from becoming stale by offering a stimulating diversion from it.

Although I am an agnostic, for almost a decade I contributed as many as three dozen 1500-word articles a year to a bi-monthly periodical that provides materials from which ministers can produce their Sunday sermons. I wrote on literary works and then almost exclusively on films that related thematically to the readings for a particular week's liturgy. (How I came to contribute to this periodical is a kind of convoluted story that will have to wait for another day.) Doing this writing eventually led to my contributing to several reference volumes on film and to my writing several journal articles in which I have compared elements of literary works and films.

Likewise, because of my active involvement in AAUP at the local and state levels, and now at the national level, I have been producing an increasing amount of writing related to issues in higher education and the political issues related to higher education, public employees, and collective bargaining. After putting together statistics related to about a dozen aspects of the student-debt crisis for a twelve-page issue of our chapter newsletter, I came across the CFP for the Midwest Modern Language Association's annual meeting. The conference theme is "Debt," and "student debt" was specifically listed among the topics of particular interest. I am not only transforming the newsletter issue on student debt into a conference presentation with a more essay-like form, but I am also presenting a paper on a group of novels about coal-mining. I have been interested in writing about these novels for more than a decade, but I doubt that I would have submitted the proposal to present the paper on them if I had not already collected the material on the student-debt crisis for the newsletter issue.

10. Finally, I will pass on the most valuable professional advice ever offered to me. After I had accepted a tenure-track appointment, my dissertation advisor, who was generally very reluctant to offer advice, recommended that, from my first day in my new position, I keep a detailed log of every professional activity on which I expended any appreciable amount of time or effort. Furthermore,

he recommended that at least once each month, I should transfer the material in this log to my vita. If I were busy and productive, he reasoned, this exercise would reinforce the value of my efforts and give me a visceral incentive to sustain them. If I were less productive, the exercise would remind me that the probationary period is short and provide a warning about the need to ramp up my efforts.

Another advantage to the exercise, one which my dissertation advisor may have anticipated but have seen no need to share because it would become self-evident, is that it tremendously expedites the process of preparing one's application for promotion and tenure. When I applied for promotion to associate professor with tenure and then to full professor, I spent about an hour in each instance adapting my vita to the somewhat but not greatly different format that our university requires for promotion and tenure documents. It is the first advice that I pass on to any new colleague who asks for some general advice on how to get off to a good start.

It also provides a nice note on which to end this essay.

Biographical Information

I am a professor of English at Wright State's Lake Campus, where I coordinate the baccalaureate programs in English and Liberal Studies. I have received the university's Trustees' Award, given to one faculty member each year for sustained excellence in teaching, service, and scholarship. I am president of the AAUP chapter/bargaining unit at Wright State, and I have previously served as an assistant grievance officer, an at-large member of the executive committee, and vice-president. I also have been elected to the board of the Ohio Conference of AAUP, as the at-large representative for the public colleges and universities, and to the executive committee of the national Collective Bargaining Congress, and I have recently been asked to join the editorial board of Academe. I have been involved in AURCO since its founding: I have served as AURCO president, have chaired three AURCO conferences, have received AURCO's distinguished service award., and have been elected this past year to AURCO's initial board of directors.