

Reception for New Women Faculty

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Iowa Memorial Union

remarks by Teresa Mangum, English Department

Managing, Mentoring, and Making It at the University of Iowa

I'm very honored to have been asked to speak at this lovely inaugural New Women Faculty Reception by members of the Council on the Status of Women, a group of which I have been a proud member in the past.

After toying with any number of dazzling and inspiring topics I might address, I decided to use my time today to do what I enjoy most—offer advice. (My family sardonically claims that my dream job would be a local cable access show called, "Here's what I think.") Given that I've had more than a decade to think about what it means to succeed as a faculty member at the University of Iowa, I can't resist the opportunity to share those thoughts with this captive audience of newcomers. I hope those of you who are coming to us as seasoned faculty members rather than junior colleagues will accept my sincere welcome and join me in offering the gifts of information and encouragement that you and I can share with new *junior* colleagues, who were especially on my mind as I prepared for this afternoon.

Already, you've all gotten pragmatic advice, no doubt, from our administrators at the fall orientation. Soon you'll have your first-year review, a somewhat unnerving experience since what most of you will have managed so far is unpacking, and, bizarrely, there's no category on the cv for that stunning accomplishment. And quite likely you've gotten contradictory tips and taunts—from "just take it easy this first year" to "and *when* will the book be coming out?"—from your new colleagues. Now it's my turn.

I want to speak very briefly about three topics that, in retrospect, helped me to settle into Iowa in my first years here:

- 1) laying claim to your identity as a new faculty member
- 2) making your way to the mentors you'll need, and
- 3) making a life while making a career.

And so...here's what I think.

I sometimes catch myself and my colleagues talking about surviving rather than thriving. Particularly as a junior faculty member, it's tempting to feel more like the bug than the windshield, more like a victim than a victor. For those of you who arrive in your pre-tenure years, one way to shape your career in terms of success rather than survival is to think carefully about what is and isn't in your control. Once your colleagues have clarified the requirements of your discipline for tenure, a great deal is in your control.

First and foremost, you need to plot the next five (not six) years for yourself *in reverse*. We ask our students to mark their progress with benchmarks, and we can do the same by creating what I think of as a "reverse calendar," a reasonable set of goals to achieve semester by semester, one step at a time, as you move not just toward tenure, but toward the kind of career you want to have for years to come. I wasted more time than I'll confess terrorizing myself by declaring, "I have to write a book!" As soon as I started writing a few pages a day, a chapter or an article a semester, tenure looked far more hopeful.

In fact, for those of you in disciplines like mine that depend heavily on independent research and writing (versus the collaborative work of scientists, for example), you might find the book

Professors as Writers by Robert Boice, or others like it, useful. After decades of conducting research on academics' writing habits, Boice acts as a writing coach, offering sensible, manageable strategies for weaving one's research and writing into the complicated days of teaching, meeting students, attending meetings, and lectures—the complex “multi-tasking” that few of us are prepared for by our graduate education or postdoctoral fellowships.

It's all too easy to assume identities as an academic that actually interfere with a career—identities like the victim, the self-deluder, or the recluse. But finding the balance among our obligations—writing researchers argue, for instance, that every weekday should begin with research so that we're psychologically freer of anxiety and therefore better able to focus on students and colleagues—finding that balance is the best possible preparation for lifelong pleasure in work, confidence in accomplishment, and a solid sense of success versus a tense sense of survival. That is, finding a balance is a necessary first step for those who seek a career rather than merely the finish line of tenure or an award or a promotion.

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While it's crucial to define for yourself what parts of the process you do have control over—and to take that control—it's equally important to know when you need help and advice and, quite simply, to ask for it.

As you will have already noticed, senior faculty members at our University are exceedingly busy. In part, this is because many of us have learned one of Iowa's most delightful secrets. If you're willing to do the work, you can make almost anything happen here. As a member of the Provost search committee last year, I learned from candidates across the country how very rare it is to have the ability to collaborate with colleagues within and across disciplines—whether as co-teachers, as members of a seminar at the Obermann Center, as co-directors of grants and colloquia, or through affiliation with eclectic programs from Women's Studies to International Programs.

Similarly, the welcome mat at Sponsored Programs is always out for those with the initiative to seek information about external grants and help in applying. And particularly after tenure, faculty are encouraged and expected to serve as citizens of the University whether as members of Faculty Senate, of key University Committees such as the Council on Teaching, the Research Council, the Diversity Committee, the Council on the Status of Women, or in my college, CLAS, the Dean's Executive Committee or the Educational Policy Committee.

All of which is to say, if senior colleagues aren't knocking on your office door, that probably just means they're preoccupied, not uninterested. So don't wait like one of the Victorian wallflowers I find myself describing to my students in Victorian literature classes. I can't tell you how delighted I am when a junior colleague or a new senior colleague mentions having coffee. I feel chagrined that I've been a poor welcome committee, but impressed at my new colleague's initiative and grateful for her or his interest in getting to know me, my work, and my department.

In addition, I would also strongly encourage you to stretch beyond your department. Some of my dearest friends as well as most valued colleagues are people from other departments that I met at my own orientation events back in 1990. In fact—true confessions—some of the best co-mentoring I've ever had came from three women friends, each of us from a different department, who formed a work group/gym group/hot tub group that remains the source of some of my fondest memories of my first years. In fact, forming a work group is the most immediately useful thing you can do—and do right away. Some groups share five pages of an on-going project weekly; other groups rotate sessions, devoting one meeting every few weeks to an individual's project. The point is to construct meaningful, regular deadlines and to share accountability for everyone's progress.

I was also deeply fortunate to be part of an exciting intellectual community of faculty, staff, and students who met monthly as part of a Women's Studies reading group. Units like International Programs, the Center for Human Rights, and POROI all currently host interdisciplinary reading groups which welcome newcomers. Time management is always a challenge, but colleagues and ideas from outside your discipline are not only refreshing; they often serve as a catalyst in helping you to conceptualize your work in fresh, new ways.

Sharing perspectives on your career and your work with your own colleagues is crucial to succeeding in your department. Forming larger intellectual communities can also make Iowa feel like a real home by introducing you to people and ideas that keep your mind nimble and your soul settled. Both states are crucial to my final bit of advice—concentrate on making a life here as well as a career.

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One of the reasons I became interested in scholars who study academic culture is that I knew both my identity and my career would need a broader venue than a press and a classroom. You may have noticed from my accent as well as my way of conceiving the world that I would have more predictably tried to climb Grandfather Mountain than an ivory tower. Another of Boice's books, *The New Faculty Member*, was therefore a great comfort to me. In this study of new faculty members located in a variety of settings, he repeatedly found that contrary to expectation, those faculty members that he called the "quick starters" were remarkably well-rounded. In fact, a crucial factor in the success of most of the quick-starters was that they forged a career in the midst of a life—whether that life consisted of the distractions of family or friends or joining a choir or taking cooking lessons at Devotay or New Pioneer Co-op or participating in a community organization (or luring friends into the hot tub as well as a work group).

In other words, today at this lovely inaugural welcome reception, the Council on the Status of Women and the Provost's Office have brilliantly set you on the path to success in your career, paved your way to meeting many potential co-mentors and senior mentors, and encouraged you to have a life, at least a social life. I'm very grateful to be part of launching you on this exciting journey. And I'm pleased to share the news that it gets better and better as you experience the rich resources and exciting opportunities the University of Iowa offers, as you gather bright colleagues and warm, witty friends in the course of your career, and as you find yourself like many of us who have been here for some time, reflecting upon the life as well as the career you've cultivated in Iowa City.

At least that's what I think—on or off my fantasy local cable show.

Welcome!

Recommended Reading

Boice, Robert. *The New Faculty Member: Supporting and Fostering Professional Development*. San Francisco, CA : Jossey-Bass, 1992.

Boice, Robert. *Professors as Writers* (a guide as well as accumulated research). Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press, 1990.