

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO CAREERS WORKSHOP FOR WOMEN GRADUATE STUDENTS AND POSTDOCS
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Amanda Peet's contribution notes

When I was invited to speak, a few days ago, I was given a list of topics:-

- postdoc experience
- starting your academic career
- teaching stream experience
- building your research portfolio
- non-traditional research and how to frame it; pushing boundaries,
- publications and authorship
- co-recruitment of partners
- managing the imbalance: family, extended family, non-traditional families, work, study, health, life, activism
- choosing not to have a family
- systemic challenges relating to being a mother; also, are they specific to U of T?,
- time to tenure
- time management
- logging 'invisible work' for tenure/promotion dossier

and

"when is the best time to have children?"

I was also told that I would be speaking for - ten minutes!! But doing any justice to even one of these topics is impossible in ten minutes, especially for us academics - who do tend to like the sound of our own voices...

I'm here today because I've accumulated real experience at top-echelon universities in New Zealand, the USA, and Canada - including Stanford, Princeton, and Harvard - doing research, teaching, service/committee work, outreach, etc. About the only thing on the topic list I haven't done yet is to be a mother - partly by choice and also now because of disability. You can learn about several aspects of my academic life by perusing my web pages (just google "Amanda Peet physics" to find me, rather than the Hollywood actress, or surf to my physics front page at <http://www.physics.utoronto.ca/~peet/>). So let me make my contribution a little differently, as a set of musings about three things:

Philosophy;
Communication;
Balance.

PHILOSOPHY

My favourite quotation about education is:

"Education is not the filling of a pail,
but the lighting of a fire."
- by William Butler Yeats.

This quote helped me to fully own my responsibility for success. Being the "classical passive female", by contrast, is a sure-fire way to drop out of sight and hence out of mind.

No-one else is responsible for getting you your PhD, your first postdoc, your first faculty job, your tenure, or your promotion. Of course, other people - like the profs who write recommendation/evaluation letters - can certainly help (or hinder!) you, but even your favourite mentors cannot make a good case to any colleague without substantive evidence: evidence that can be put on paper first and then talked up.

So, "publish or perish" is, unfortunately, really true. The reason is simple: academia is not immune to the many competitive forces acting in the world. In particular, a university is not a suitable refuge for the timid! In my experience, excellent universities are every bit as competitive as my corporate friends tell me their companies are.

My pain specialist prefers the phrase:

"If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen."

True enough - but it's also really legitimate to ask: "Do I like getting burned?!?"

Expect to have to learn new skills, for survival's sake, at the same time as maintaining/building your personal integrity. I reckon this is actually the fundamental balance equation to concentrate on: survival versus integrity.

The Buddhists say that pain is just the other side of joy. So: expect hardship, if you

desire success, and remember to plan for both. Inevitably, Life will intervene in your academic trajectory - whether it's husband care, child care, elder care, health care or whatever.

Balance your desire to change the world with realism about your employability. In the tenure stream - or before - don't spend more than about 10% (hard maximum 20%) of your working hours on committees, mentoring, outreach, or activism. Be realistic: pre-tenure, you are in no position to change the criteria for tenure evaluation!

The only two things which count towards tenure are, first, your research record, and second, your teaching record.

COMMUNICATION

It is therefore sensible to work on strategies for success. Some will be very specific ("rifle" approach), while others will be more general ("shotgun" approach).

Whether an evaluator knows you well, slightly, or not at all, your evaluator isn't telepathic! You need to tell them about your accomplishments. Communicate!!

e.g.: suppose you are a highly ethical TA. But if you never clearly communicate your high ethical standards to your students or your supervisors, how can they know? Clearly, you need to both be ethical and be seen to be ethical for you to become known as an ethical person.

Practice talking about your research (and teaching) - rehearse the 30-second version, the 2-minute version, the 5-minute version, and the version for your time-limited conference/workshop presentation. Practice practice practice - you must rehearse because it's always easier to talk about something at length than to be succinct!

When I was a young postdoc at Princeton, I met an amazing Biology professor at a Women-in-Science lunch meeting. Professor Shirley Tilghman is now President of Princeton, and she has massively improved the situation for women there (e.g. via hiring female deans). She was recently quoted in the Guardian weekly making a crucial point:

"Being able to articulate a position and really be prepared to fight it out, you have to have those kind of debating skills. Women come culturally less prepared to engage in the rough and tumble of scientific debate, and so we need to concentrate attention on getting them comfortable on their feet, arguing".

Practice giving talks in 'safe' environments first - e.g. women-in-physics social lunches, grad student journal clubs, internal seminars.

Build up to giving at least one conference talk before PhD graduation.

Search committees in Physics look for teaching talent in your job-talk, not your dossier. (In Mathematics teaching experience is, by contrast, expected; this stems from smaller typical research grants in that field.)

BALANCE

Expect to have to think constantly about finding the right balance for yourself. Please note that this is NOT a "work versus family" balance; it is a balance between "work-life and personal-life", whether that includes {a stereotypical committed heterosexual relationship with biological children in a house with a white picket fence} or not. Remember that being a woman is just one aspect of our being - we all wear other labels too. Diversities intersect; being a woman isn't a single-issue phenomenon.

Some of us cannot have children because of our medical status. This is just one example of how limiting biology can be. Another example is what all my women friends in physics who are mothers have told me: most smart young women nowadays are remarkably ignorant about their own bodies - and in particular about how drastically female fertility drops with age. Modern medical literature shows that your best time to have a child is when you are youngest - well before 30. But it is harder financially early on, plus having children enormously reduces your mobility. This is a pity because the academic job market is unequivocally international: academics need mobility as a success strategy. So choose your husband carefully!

As far as I have heard, the issues faced by mothers at UofT are less severe than issues faced in the wider world. This is a relatively enlightened workplace; evidence includes the fact that UofT was the only university to make last year's "Top 100" list of the Best Employers to work for in Canada. I have found UofT considerably less toxic to women than most other top universities where I have worked or visited.

ISMS

Unfortunately, there is a lot of bigotry in academia, just like in the corporate sector (and even in the community-and-voluntary sector) of human activity.

Bigots can achieve bigotry consciously and with menace, or unconsciously - i.e. obliviously. A good rule for picking your battles is: never attribute to malice what you can otherwise attribute to incompetence!

Don't imagine that you are immune to sexism. You will run up against sexism at some point, it's just a question of when. Typically the more senior you get, the more threatening you are to the powerful elite, and hence the more likely you are to experience negative impacts of sexism.

I have experienced considerable negative influences on my career from both sexists and disability-bigots, here at UofT - from colleagues and students - and elsewhere.

How to cope?? Personally, I find it very difficult to stomach hypocrisy; e.g. when an academic leader says one thing but does another (or does nothing) I find myself unmotivated to be guided by their leadership. So I try to stay away from toxic types and keep a close eye on the inspiring types.

The way to fight is to have a two-pronged strategy:

Keep your vision clear and long-term;

Keep your actions local and limited in scope - this provides ongoing measurable successes as you gradually build to realign reality to your vision.

Always remember the Golden Rule: GET IT ON PAPER! Keep all confidential paper trails at home. At work, make sure any offer you are given is put in writing.

Mentoring is just one important component of your overall strategy for success. Remember that a mentoring relationship is a two-way street; benefits come to both sides. Don't forget that you can be an effective mentor as well as a mentee. Also, note that it's not necessary for young women scientists to find only female mentors - some of my most effective (and most feminist) mentors have actually been male. Best practice shows the way to putting a few simple extra safeguards in place. The best succinct advice I've read regarding male-female mentoring, and on mentoring in general, is by Bernice Sandler ("The Woman Behind Title IX" in the USA) at <http://www.bernicessandler.com/id5.htm> . At bernicessandler.com you can also read her excellent remarks about sexual harrassment and the chilly climate.

If you're looking to become an academic, a great book for those in the physical sciences and engineering is "Tomorrow's Professor" by Stanford's Richard Reis. There are dozens of other good books as well; this is just the one I have thoroughly battle-tested.

I hope this was useful. Work hard, and good luck!! :-)