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Return to Academia, Part Six: A Year in Review



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WASHINGTON, D.C.
5 DECEMBER 2003

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"There is no single word I can use to describe my first year. I've been happy, stressed, frustrated, and tired, but this is the most fun I have had in quite some time!"

Can you believe it? I have reached my 1-year anniversary, since returning to academics at Claflin University. My professional life has been hectic and out of control at times, but I am making the most of it. This article will discuss the ups and downs of my first year as an assistant professor and what I've learned during the process.

Patience and Teaching

Since I returned to academia, I realize that I have to be more patient with my students. I sometimes forget this important fact when discussing chemistry concepts such as balancing redox reactions or detailing laboratory techniques such as suction filtration. During one general chemistry laboratory period, one of my students said, "Dr. Collins, you don't seem like you have a lot of patience." I took this statement to really mean, "Dr. Collins, what may be obvious to you, is not obvious to us." As educators, we have to learn to adjust our teaching methods to fit the needs of the class. And every class is different.

As teaching assistants (TAs) during graduate school, many of us developed our own "teaching style," but due to research and coursework responsibilities, developing an effective teaching strategy was not a high priority. It may be useful for science departments to form collaborations with education departments and work with pedagogy experts when training graduate students to teach undergraduate science courses. The [department of chemistry at the University of Michigan](#) has created

a program like this. We should recognize different learning styles and other educational approaches.

Research vs. Teaching Load

If you plan to return to academics, and you want to teach at a small liberal arts institution, you should realize that you will spend a significant amount of time teaching and *not* conducting research. I clearly underestimated the amount of time I would spend preparing lectures, teaching, and grading laboratory reports, exams, and quizzes. Although Claflin is not a research-oriented institution, I was still expected to conduct research and publish my data in peer-reviewed journals. I did this all on my own because I didn't have a postdoctoral associate or other laboratory personnel to teach my laboratory courses for me. Keep in mind that research, publications, and grants are factors for tenure. Yes, it was extremely difficult balancing my research priorities with teaching responsibilities, but because I worked with wonderful research collaborators-- discussing experimental results and ideas through frequent e-mails--my job was a lot easier. Not to mention, I had two wonderful undergraduate students working with me.

Final Thoughts

I have experienced many things as a new assistant professor during this past year. I had my first research presentation since returning to academia during the Southeastern Regional American Chemical Society [Annual Meeting](#) held in Atlanta, Georgia, November 2003 and really enjoyed the conference.

Second, I officially had the opportunity to take six sophomore students under my wing and become their advisor. Like any good advisor, I sat down with each of my advisees to discuss their career goals. All of the students wanted to earn a graduate degree in chemistry or biochemistry, which reminded me of why I made the decision to return to academics. True happiness for me is helping students and I know I am contributing something to the next generations of chemists. Third, I began making more progress in my research. Granted, the progress was slow, but promising.

There is no single word I can use to describe my first year. I've been happy, stressed, frustrated, and tired, but this is the most fun I have had in quite some time!

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