Academic politics during your job search and beyond

Noah Weisleder, Ph.D.
Professor and Director of Graduate Studies
Department of Physiology and Cell Biology
The Ohio State University

September 29, 2022
If there was any job that didn’t have politics we would all want that job.

This job does not exist.
How do we begin to understand academic politics?

• Newcomers to the academy do not necessarily or understand the rules and norms

• Many of the social rules are informal, unstated, ambiguous and surprising to many
  – You need to explore and analyze your surroundings

• Look at academic roles in relation to others
  – Understanding what motivates and constrains the various individuals at a university

• While academic may strive for more they are people like anyone else, and they will act that way.
  – There are unique elements that color politics

https://www.universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/career-advice-article,strategies-understanding-navigating-academic-underlife/
What are the unique elements of academic politics

Tenure affect many things:

• Limited mobility options
• Power imbalances
• Working closely with others
• Close knit nature of many fields
• Influence over the perception of junior faculty
• Needing support for tenure and promotion
• Finite resources
• Small empires to be protected
"Academic politics is the most vicious and bitter form of politics, because the stakes are so low."

Wallace Stanley Sayre
There is hope!

You can manage and even thrive in academic politics!

Our agenda for today:

Applying for a faculty position

When you start a new position

Promotion, tenure and your chair

Skills that help navigate politics
You should think about politics when job hunting

• Think about politics before applying for a faculty position
• Who is working in your area in the department?
  – What is their relationship to your mentor?
  – Are there research conflicts/opportunities there
• What is the reputation of the department?
  – Tap into your network to gain insight
  – Highly ranked is not necessarily healthy
• How many faculty and how long have they been there?
• What is the funding situation in the department?
• Not every job is the right job for you
It is vital to understand the politics of the campus

• One of the key topics at your interview
• Ask questions that reveal culture and politics
  – How does ‘???’ get done here?
  – How are decisions made here?
  – How do you interact with the chair?
  – What is the department’s tenuring history?
  – Are associate and senior faculty generally happy?
  – Is the department split generationally?
  – How consistent and substantive is mentoring?
• Ask the same questions to different people, you may get different answers and that can give you insight.
Other ways to understand department/campus politics

• Request a copy of the last few external departmental review reports
• Ask for a copy of the department’s (and institution's) strategic plan and tenure/promotion docs
  – If there isn’t one that tells you something
• Review publications from faculty
  – Can reveal degree of collaboration
• Check online for any information on faculty
• News reports about investigations/scandals
  – Local newspapers are key for this
  – Campus newspapers are also useful

Future of Research Mentoring Climate Guidelines

In order to be considered as having achieved a particular excellence tier for the guidelines below, the department...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gold</th>
<th>Silver</th>
<th>Bronze</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Requires that the mentoring committee contains three or more individuals to address specific mentoring needs and meets on a regular basis to task the trainee's progression through the program.</td>
<td>Requires the creation of a mentoring committee that is separate from the thesis advisory committee to oversee the trainee's progression through the program.</td>
<td>Requires at least one co-mentor in addition to the PI to oversee the trainee's progression through the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires all mentors to take at least one other, more senior peer mentor in the department.</td>
<td>Requires all Ph.D. students to take recurring mentor training. Data on mentor training is publicly available to trainees.</td>
<td>Groups incoming trainees into peer cohorts and organizes social events for interaction and networking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collects alumni data in follow-up surveys (e.g., 2 years later). Exceptional service and mentoring are recognized. Mentors can be highlighted in alumni surveys.</td>
<td>Collects data from anonymous exit surveys used for institutional improvement.</td>
<td>Collects data from required anonymous exit surveys and uses it for departmental improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides a D&amp;I office or point person specifically tasked with and given the power to drive culture change in the department, provide support to URM trainees, conduct and publish results from climate surveys, and sit on hiring committees.</td>
<td>Provides clear and transparent guidelines for training and accountability. Mentors report the demographics of the department and have pipeline programs for former trainees.</td>
<td>Requires recurring D&amp;I and unconscious bias training for individuals at all career stages and provides accommodations for disabled trainees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hosts regular mental health awareness events. The department requires at least one person per research group to be trained in mental health first aid and regularly surveys student mental health, publicly reporting results.</td>
<td>Provides a public and easily-navigable website with a list of all available resources, promotes them to incoming trainees, and holds optional mental health first aid training for those interested.</td>
<td>Hosts career-specific panels and workshops. Trainees are required to attend at least one, and are allowed to choose those of interest.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not implemented

- Encourages more mentors in addition to the PI or does nothing.
- Provides no formal organization of peer mentors.
- Encourages Ph.D. students to take mentor training or does nothing.
- Encourages some form of anonymous exit survey or does nothing.
- Encourages D&I training or does nothing.
- Aims to foster inclusive and safe training environments and says nothing.
- Encourages Ph.D. to provide clear guidelines and timelines for completion or does nothing.
- Aims to provide trainees with wellness resources or does nothing.
- Encourages main Ph.D. to provide career guidance for trainees or does nothing.

Supplemental Mentoring Support

- Peer Support Cohorts
- Required Mentor Training
- Anonymous Exit Surveys
- Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Efforts
- Transparent Accountability
- Clear Guidelines and Timelines
- Mental Health and Wellness Resources
- Career Development Resources

Can be used to understand the strength of the mentoring environment in a department you are considering.

https://www.futureofresearch.org/category/mentoring/
Every campus has different politics, but they fall into 4 major models:

1. **Collegial model**, with consensus or shared power.

2. **Bureaucratic model**, with many systems and processes.

3. **Political model**, made up of smaller heterogeneous groups with different and often competing goals.

4. **Anarchical model**, which is a large number of autonomous players in a fluid environment.

Different people will perform well in different environments.

https://www.higheredjobs.com/articles/article Display.cfm?ID=425
Politics of a job offer and your negotiation

• **Salary**
  – You will likely hear that they don’t want to cause issues with other faculty
  – Small differences in starting pay can add up over time

• **Space** (always a political issue)
  – Research space
  – Office space

• **Startup funds**
  – Provide rationales
  – Consider politics of shared equipment

• Make sure your offer letter contains all that you need and the specifics on it (including room numbers for space and actual numbers for promised funds)
What do you do once are faculty?

• Embrace campus politics, don't be discouraged by it
  – Opportunity to develop new relationships!

• Even when busy **do not** hide in your office
  – Meet with *all* your colleagues in your department
  – Schedule meetings in *their* offices
  – Talk to other colleagues around campus
  – Beware of lopsided “collaborations”

• Eat lunch/get coffee with as many people as you can

• Your goal is to learn the culture and establish trust

• These networking efforts are as important as networking in your field of study

https://www.higheredjobs.com/articles/articleDisplay.cfm?ID=425
Politics is *part of your job* as a faculty member

- Resources are how you can work with your students and conduct your research
- Align your goals with the school's Strategic Plan
- Spend a few hours with administrators who can help you leverage additional resources that your students need
- Treat administrators and assistants like people
  - Administrative assistants are the gatekeepers
  - Inspectors
  - Grant officers
  - Security & custodians

https://www.higheredjobs.com/articles/articleDisplay.cfm?ID=425
Relationships are the currency of politics

• Not all relationships are equal
• What are the relationships you need to be successful?
  ‒ Who has the power to make decisions?
  ‒ Can you trust them?
• Make sure they can trust you and your goals.
• Demonstrate yourself as a very competent person
  ‒ Don’t miss opportunities to talk to leaders
  ‒ Speak up in meetings (but respectfully)
  ‒ Always follow up and be reliable
• Make sure to jump at opportunities

https://www.higheredjobs.com/articles/articleDisplay.cfm?ID=425
Your department chair is usually key for promotion

• My dad always told me “All you have to do is keep your boss and your boss’ boss happy and you’re golden.”
• In most institutions (but not all) the chair and dean have major input on promotion and tenure
• That means make your chair and dean happy and tenure becomes much easier
• Meet with your chair more than once a year
  – Start with monthly at a minimum
  – Can do less as time goes on
  – Meet with your Dean too
• Your priority could conflict with other priorities of your fellow faculty
  – Focus on your priorities
What does your chair want from you?

- **Know Yourself (and mentor up)**
  - Know the right fit and let them know what it is

- **Know What Is Expected of You and Deliver It**

- **Further Your Institutional and Departmental Missions**
  - Tailor what you do to fit within broader priorities

- **Never Lie**

- **Respect Everyone**
  - Be collegial and avoid creating antagonistic relationships

- **Pick Your Battles** (so know your own priorities)

- **Own Your Mistakes**

https://tomprof.stanford.edu/posting/976
Toxic environment in a department/college

- Even if you are looking for it you may miss this at your interview
- Toxicity in departments is marked by a dominant culture, ethos, or mode of operation in which power is abused
- Divisive departmental cultures, rather than the tasks of the job, may spoil career progression
- Faculty may partake in destructive behavior without being wholly villainous
- Understand the Title IX and other compliance culture in the department. Who is in charge? Is this a priority for the department/university?

https://academicmatters.ca/seeking-tenure-how-junior-scholars-should-navigate-troubled-departmental-waters/
When do politics become bullying or harassment?

• How are identity differences contended with in the department?
• Do senior scholars discourage graduate students from working with junior colleagues?
• How are identity differences contended with in the department?
• What is the interpersonal climate in the department?
  – Are there senior faculty coupled with graduate students?
  – Do graduate students complain of sexual harassment but stop short of reporting incidents out of fear?
  – Do senior faculty ask junior faculty out on dates?
• Consider the potential ramifications of a relationship with someone at your institution

https://academicmatters.ca/seeking-tenure-how-junior-scholars-should-navigate-troubled-departmental-waters/
What else can you do to help navigate academic politics?

There are skills that can help.
Skills to build to help avoid political conflict

A partial list

Network and Connect

Effective Communication

Emotional Intelligence

Conflict resolution
Building your professional network is vital in many ways.

My Mentoring Network
(adapted from materials at WEBS 2011/ www.facultydiversity.org)

ME and MY Priorities

- Readers (see intellectual community)
- Department Colleagues
- Professional Editor(s)
- Substantive Feedback
- Professional Development (Outside of Scientific Sphere)
- Accountability for what MATTERS!! (subtopics may apply)
- Role Models
- Sponsorship/Promoters
- Safe Space
- Intellectual Community (ex: Paper or Grant Readers)
- Access to Opportunities

Internal
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

External
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

Friends
- 1
- 2
- 3

Family
- 1
- 2
- 3

Other
- 1
- 2
- 3

0-25% Complete
- 1
- 2
- 3

25-50% Complete
- 5
- 6
- 7

50-75% Complete
- 9
- 10
- 11

75-100% Complete
- 13
- 14
- 15
- 16

The Ohio State University
Wexner Medical Center
Keys to Effective Communication

Effective Communication skills

- Connecting with The audience
- Simple Words
- Body language (Smile, Eye contact, Gestures, tone)
- Cultural Sensitivity
- Seeking Participation
- Checking for understanding
- Summarizing what has been said
- Effective Questions

https://slideplayer.com/slide/7355737/
Ways to Increase Your Emotional Intelligence

- Utilize an assertive style of communicating
- Respond instead of reacting to conflict
- Utilize active listening skills
- Be motivated
- Practice ways to maintain a positive attitude
- Practice self-awareness
- Take critique well
- Empathize with others
- Utilize leadership skills
- Be approachable and sociable

https://www.inc.com/young-entrepreneur-council/10-ways-to-increase-your-emotional-intelligence.html
Keys to Successful Conflict Resolution

• Identify the root of the problem
• Focus on the problem, not the people
• Never assume
• Be the best communicator
• Engage in active listening
• Stay neutral (if you can)
• Seek common ground
• Anticipate conflict
• Be strategic
• Don’t be afraid to ask for help

https://www2.buildingchampions.com/blog/building-champions/the-7-keys-to-successful-conflict-resolution/
https://aboutleaders.com/5-keys-to-conflict-resolution/#gs.rb74mf
Summary of the impact of politics on your early academic career

• Applying for a faculty position
  – Know the politics before you join the department

• When you start a new position
  – Networking and communication can get ahead of political problems

• Promotion, tenure and your chair
  – Focus on your priorities with guidance from your chair and dean

• Skills that help navigate politics
  – Networking
  – Communication
  – Emotional intelligence
  – Conflict resolution
Thank You

Noah Weisleder, Ph.D.
Professor and Director of Graduate Studies
Department of Physiology and Cell Biology
The Ohio State University
473 W. 12th Ave. Columbus, OH 43210-1252
Phone (614) 292-5321
noah.weisleder@osumc.edu

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
WEXNER MEDICAL CENTER

Noah Weisleder  @weislederlab  weisleder.org