

**The Cafeteria Approach to Managing an Academic Career:  
Remaining Non-perishable While Doing Your Own Thing**

Robert E. Ledman, Morehouse College  
Sandra Morgan, University of Hartford  
Selime Sezgin, Istanbul Technical University

**FORMAT**

Type of session: Roundtable discussion.  
Presentation from three authors followed by general discussion.

**INTRODUCTION**

The traditional view of an academic career is one of “publish or perish.” In this model one is rewarded for research and publishing. Furthermore, that research is expected to have a consistent theme or focus and increase our knowledge in a specific subject area. To be truly successful under this model, the publishing record should include articles in “top tier” journals. Thus, the typical doctoral program emphasizes research. Students work with regular faculty as research assistants and take courses in statistics and research methods. However, the “publish and perish” model is not the only approach that can lead to a successful career. In many institutions a three dimensional approach of teaching, publishing and service is the norm. It might even be argued that this more balanced approach is gaining in popularity, at least if one accepts at face value what is being written about the changes in higher education.

This more balanced view has brought about a

reexamination of the traditional academic career. Accrediting bodies are putting more emphasis on outcomes. Students and parents are demanding more accountability for their money and colleges and universities are competing more vigorously for students. These forces have caused many institutions to examine their “product” and realize that more emphasis must be placed on teaching excellence, building partnerships with the surrounding community, and delivering value to the consumer. The result of these changes is a reassessment of the traditional approaches to promotion and tenure decisions. However, in a typical doctoral program there is not much discussion of how to remain non-perishable and still be able to do your own thing. This round-table/workshop has the goal of assisting faculty who want a career with more freedom to understand the ramifications of such a decision and hear about tested implementation strategies. The presenters have all taken non-traditional approaches to their careers and met with success. They have learned what is not taught in doctoral programs and is often learned only by trial and error. They will share what they have learned and the insights they have gained about how to have a fulfilling, successful, academic career while having the freedom to “do your own thing” and choose from a menu of options.

## **METHOD**

The presenters will each make a brief presentation of 5-10 minutes. They will then lead a discussion focusing on designing a successful academic career strategy for those who are not inclined to do a substantial amount of research in a specific topic over a number of years (the traditional view of academic success). The discussion will cover several areas. First, what are the limitations of a career in an environment that is not “publish or perish?” Second, how do I know if a non-traditional academic career is for me? Third, what are the rewards of a career that balances teaching, service and research? Fourth, will I be able to find a job if I do not have a record of publishing that demonstrates a consistent focus? Other issues of interest to participants will be explored as they arise.

## **PRESENTATION SUMMARIES**

### **Presenter One**

The first presenter has had a successful career as a faculty member in two liberal arts colleges and a small university. The first position he assumed while completing his dissertation. The second position he obtained was in a university with a business school. His third position is in a nationally ranked liberal arts college whose business program is in candidacy for AACSB accreditation each position resulted in progressively higher salaries. One of the small liberal arts colleges heavily emphasized teaching and college service/ governance in evaluations. The small university emphasized a balance of teaching, service and research with research being of lesser importance. He is currently teaching at a liberal arts institution that emphasizes

teaching while expecting scholarly activity that includes publishing and presenting.

He will briefly summarize his career in small teaching-oriented institutions. From his own experiences he will discuss the limitations presented when one teaches in small colleges: limited resources, lower salaries, and heavier teaching loads. He will also discuss the benefits of such an environment flexibility to do research in any area(s) of one's choosing, smaller class sizes, and more independence in textbook selection and course design. Several issues to consider in one's career are not viewed universally as positive or negative. These issues include contact with students outside of the classroom, advising, committee assignments, and participation in college life. This presenter will also draw on his experience in three different institutions to discuss those issues from the perspective of a non-traditional academic career. Finally, this presenter will provide insight on how to enhance one's prospects for finding satisfactory employment if one does not have the traditional record of publishing a related “body of work.”

### **Presenter Two**

The second presenter's career began non-traditionally, when she began a PhD. program at 30, balancing consulting and doctoral work, marriage, an administrative job, a 1,000-mile move, a teaching job and a baby before finishing her degree at 40. Because of family demands (being in the “sandwich generation,” she also cared for ill parents and toddlers while working full time), she never wrote or published anything from her dissertation.

When the second child was 6-months old, she switched jobs after five years as an unpublished Assistant Professor in a midwestern business school. The move to a private New England university that stressed good teaching and faculty contact with students seemed perfect. However, publications were expected and rewarded, but there had been no publishing tradition and few published faculty to guide junior faculty. So her record of not publishing continued; several conference presentations were expanded into articles, but submissions were rejected. Finally, one article was accepted at a teaching journal (lower status in the written evaluation guidelines).

Since the move in 1985, she has focused her energy on teaching, service to the university on task forces and commissions, innovative pedagogy, and conferences and professional associations focused on teaching (e.g. ABSEL, OBTC). The university reluctantly granted her tenure in 1993 with no promotion and an admonition from the President to publish!

This presenter chooses to stay in academia as a deviant doing only research she cares about deeply, a minimum of administrative work, a lot of service, excellent teaching and, unless promotion requirements change, she never intends to apply for promotion.

### **Presenter Three**

The third presenter has combined the traditional path of college--graduate school--first job--publishing--administration with marriage and (small) family. Her balance comes from her choice of research foci, her

administrative jobs and her international visits. Based in Turkey, this presenter has taken short and medium-length visiting positions in a variety of countries and often chooses to collaborate on multi-national research. At her home school, she serves as department chair, which allows her some flexibility not enjoyed by junior faculty. She will share her personal success criteria, some of her applied research topics and her conclusions about the benefits of doing administration.