

Faculty Interview by Anna A. Golovkova

The Assignment and Thinking outside of the Box

While taking a course on the Pedagogy of Higher Education at Cornell, one of my assignments was to conduct a faculty interview. My task was

“to gain insights on what it means to be a tenure-track or tenured faculty member at Cornell University. You should choose someone to interview that you feel can give you insights into what it means to grapple with teaching, research, and service at an institution like CU. Your interview questions and observations should focus on some of the teaching, research, and service aspects of the faculty experience.”

While my interviewee and I discussed the issues of teaching, research and service at an institution like Cornell extensively, I ended up reinterpreting the assignment somewhat to make it more meaningful and more useful for me, as you will see below. For my interview, I chose to interview someone whom I have known since the late nineties as a colleague from outside of the academia. I will call him Professor K. The interview took place on March 30, 2016. I first met Professor K. at a Russian translation agency, where we co-wrote and implemented a successful proposal to provide translation services in all languages to the Washington State. Professor K. was one of my role models in choosing the academic career, one of the very few academics I knew socially and someone whom I have greatly admired for his integrity, openness, flexibility, a willingness to be of active help to others, and a deprecating sense of humor, which would probably make him cringe at reading my description of his qualities above. I will never forget Professor K. and his son showing up at my door and helping me load all my meager belongings into a friend's station-wagon, filling it up like a jigsaw puzzle, before I left Seattle (my first residence after moving to the US from Russia) for the great unknown of the New York City in 1999. I have always admired Professor K.'s ability to balance work and his role as a husband and a father of two children, something that academics (and so many others) often fail at. Professor K. was one of my recommenders when I first applied to graduate school in 2006 and he and I have kept in touch over the years. While I have several other mentors at Cornell where I am working on my Doctorate now, as well as at Columbia and Oxford Universities where I completed my Master's Degrees, with whom I talk on a regular basis about the challenges of teaching in my discipline and my future trajectory as an academic — their academic

environment, disciplines, and experiences are closer to mine. I chose to interview Professor K. precisely because his experiences have been different from those of the faculty in my immediate environment and because he has held a variety of academic and administrative positions outside of the Ivy League. Professor K. has worked in a large University in the Midwest, a small liberal arts college in the North-East, and has served as a Dean both in the US and in Russia. I was interested in the advice he can give to someone aspiring to succeed in an academic position because of his unique perspective of having been on both sides of academia: as faculty and as a member of University administration. Furthermore, with the job market in the Humanities looking as scarce as it does these days, and since I do not discount possibilities of alternative employment in the educational sphere, I wanted to know more about what he thought about the differences in the challenges and rewards of being an academic and an administrator. And, finally, as a fellow Russian, I also wanted to know about his experiences working in Russia after being an academic in the US. Although I have no plans to return to Russia in the near future, this is something that I like to keep in the back of my mind as a possibility to consider in the long term.

The Inside vs. the Outside

As is often the case, the reality from the inside is something quite different than what it looks like from the outside. Although I have always admired Professor K. managing to complete his second PhD here in the US while having small kids and working outside of academia to support his family, he was extremely self-deprecating about his success. He thinks that he balanced his work and family life “not so well,” and the challenges of his research, teaching, and service — “badly,” and that he has not written as much as he would have liked. To me, this is a powerful reminder to not compare myself to others: we all think that we could have done more than we have or could have done it better. My take-away is not to become complacent, but to try and go ahead and do things imperfectly. After all, if I could do my utmost and do as “badly” as Professor K., I would consider my own life a tremendous success.

Another surprise was hearing about Professor K.’s biggest challenge as a tenure track and tenured faculty member. Knowing Professor K. to be kind and extremely easy to get along with, I was surprised to hear that he has had to deal with a hostile work environment and ended up

leaving that particular post because of it. I suppose, this is a reminder that try as I may to do my part, sometimes that may simply not end up being enough. This was a good reminder of how things can go terribly wrong regardless of one's best efforts and intentions and that one has to be prepared for these surprising ironies of fate — and roll with them. “Publish or perish” is a good adage for an academic. “Adapt, don't take things personally, and learn to move skillfully in deep waters with their occasional sharks” may be an even better one.

Methods to Enhance the Students' Learning Experience and the B-Word

Knowing Professor K. to be a self-reflective teacher, someone who has had extensive training in Pedagogy and who has given teaching a lot of thought, I wanted to know more about his experiences in creating an engaging and effective learning environment. Professor K.'s advice to assist new faculty with their faculty experience is as follows:

“Spend enough time on teaching, do not cut corners there. Be smart about your research agenda, don't just do what you have done in the past. And build connections across campus, volunteer, show up. In the end, the social capital is critical to happiness at a University.”

When asked what he wished he had known before his first class, Professor K.'s response was “That students can be very different, and most of them are not like me.” And asked about his thoughts on enhancing students' learning experience, he said:

“Mainly I attempt to create in-class and homework assignments that are varied, that is, not the same for each topic, engaging, and focused on the key competencies of the course. For example, to explain the differences among educational philosophies, I asked students to prepare skits in small groups on the topic ‘A conversation in the teachers' lounge,’ where every person represented one particular educational philosophy without naming it.”

It was up to the audience to guess what educational philosophy the speakers represented and it led to a productive discussion on espoused theory and theory-in-use regarding the differences in what educators might aspire to and what they end up doing in their daily teaching lives. Professor K. also shared that in online environment he has asked students to comment on a text stating their position using the “b-word” (beginning their statements with “because.”) This pushed students to defend their positions, rather than just state opinions. In fact, contemplating his overarching goals that transcend the subject matter of his courses, Professor K. said that he values above all

“The ability to reason beyond simple opinion. To see the other person’s point of view. The understanding that if people disagree with you, it is normally not because they are evil or stupid. I always work on student’s ability to build a longer rational argument. I always work on ‘contextual imagination’ – the ability to see how different contexts can give certain actions different meanings. The sense of complexity in social policy, and dislike of simplistic solutions. The habit to ask for evidence and to avoid the appeal to authority fallacy.”

Professor K. shared that he finds that humor always helps to make students more comfortable or more engaged. He also mentioned that “explicitly stating that students can come and talk to me is also important. I try to find positive side in every remark, and develop it further.” To get students motivated about learning and to get them more excited about the subject material, Professor K. finds that “the simplest thing is to show that you’re excited about it, and why, and that it may be relevant to their future professional lives.” Asked about his personal teaching style, Professor K. responded:

“I enjoy conversation more than lecture. My style is to show students how to think in working with their ideas. Then to ask them to do the same on their own.”

Service and the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

One of the topics Professor K. and I discussed at length was service. His own experiences of service as a faculty member consisted of committee work and program development, while in his work in the Administration, service blended in with other types of engagement, forming the core of his responsibilities. Professor K. told me that he enjoys most of his service responsibilities, in particular learning about various aspects of campus life, meeting people, and figuring out the ropes, but his experience while serving on committees has encompassed “the good, the bad and the ugly.” He found most frustrating “the typical inefficiencies of faculty governance, the habit of endless talk and little action.” His advice on balancing teaching, research, and service in his faculty position is “learn to say no, and yet have enough [responsibilities] not to look like a freeloader.” He suggests to find things that you enjoy doing. For him personally, “the best service is creative, fun, and brings some spice to one’s life.”

I particularly enjoyed learning about Professor K.’s experiences as Dean as this is something I knew very little about and wanted to know about more as I pursue various career options. When asked what he found particularly helpful about specific faculty members as Dean in his previous and current positions and about his advice to new faculty, Professor K. responded as follows:

“The most valuable people are those who can deliver what they promise. It is really the work ethics and the sense of commitment. The least helpful people are those who are flaky, who cannot organize and see through any projects, who have little organizational skills. Most faculty have terrible sense of marketing, or higher education market, of budgetary issues. The advice for those who want to keep their jobs – do your fair share, and do it well. Seek help on everything, and don’t assume that because you have a PhD you don’t need to learn anymore.”

To Administrate or not to Administrate

Asked about his thoughts on some of the differences in his roles as a faculty member and a member of administration, Professor K. responded:

“Administrator has to handle a lot more perspectives, keep other people’s secrets, try to see the big picture. A faculty life is much more luxurious, although it is paid less well.”

On the other hand, in his experience, Professor K. found that he is much more mobile as an administrator than as a tenured Professor. He said: “One advantage for administrators – you can usually find another job.” Regarding the differences in the demands on his time as a faculty member and as Dean in the US and Russia, he stated:

“The workday is much longer for administrators than for faculty, although it was hard to imagine that when I was faculty myself. It is the same in the US and in Russia. Also in faculty work load, there is space for working on personal scholarly projects. Administrators have very little opportunity for that.”

While I think I myself would enjoy the interpersonal interactions and the diplomacy that being part of the administration involves, my take-away from learning about Professor K.’s experiences was that serving on the administration will remain as my back-up plan. While I would likely enjoy the service-oriented goals of this kind of work, I would probably miss the intellectual stimulation that a combination of teaching and research provides. And I certainly don’t miss sitting in the long meetings since my days in the business sector. Serving on the administration may be something that I will turn to later in life, but it is not something I would like to actively pursue at this time.

The Bear and the Eagle

Finally, in our discussion of working in Russia and in the US, Professor K. did not agree with my framing of the differences as “cultural.” Questioned about the differences, he responded:

“Yes, Russian universities have a lot less structure than is taken for granted in the US. Those are not cultural, but institutional differences. I don’t really believe in culture. Russians are a

lot more sexist and homophobic, less inclusive, and much less efficient. But they value the relational side of work environment a lot more. So it is better to work with Americans, but hang out with Russians.”

My final take away from this: How I miss interacting with Russians. I must make an effort to do that more often.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I will say that I found that interviewing someone I have known for many years illuminating. It showed me a sense of Professor K.’s career trajectory and revealed the facets of his personality as an educator that I have not observed before despite our long acquaintance. I enjoyed his common-sense advice and his uniquely Russian way of putting things on occasion. It would be interesting to repeat this process again at a later time, perhaps after I have had my own faculty experiences I could discuss with him.

Here is a list of some of the things that have stayed with me following the interview.

Surviving in Academia:

- Go ahead and do things imperfectly. What seems “not-so-good” to you now may be an inspiration to someone else one day.
- Adapt, don’t take things personally, and learn to move skillfully in deep waters.

Tips on Teaching

- Sense of humor always helps to decrease the students’ sense of anxiety.
- To vary the stimulus, use skits where people act out their character’s agendas without explicitly naming them to start a discussion.
- Emphasize the process of arriving at answers. Push students to defend their positions, rather than just state opinions.
- Reinforce a developmental mindset.
- Build contextual imagination in students: the ability to see how different contexts can give certain actions different meanings.
- To get students motivated show that you are excited about the topic and explain why.
- To elicit lasting learning, demonstrate how the course content may be relevant to their future professional lives.

Tips on Balancing Teaching, Research, and Service

- Spend enough time on teaching, do not cut corners there. Prep-work is important.
- Be smart about your research agenda, don't just do what you have done in the past.
- Build connections across campus, volunteer, show up. In the end, the social capital is critical to happiness at a University.
- Learn to say no, and yet have enough responsibilities not to look like a freeloader.
- The best service is creative, fun, and brings spice to life.
- The most valuable people are those who can deliver what they promise.
- Don't assume that because you have a PhD you don't need to learn anymore.
- The workday is much longer for administrators than for faculty, although it is hard to imagine that for faculty.
- Spend time with a variety of people, including those from your native country.