

# Assistant Professorship – Part 1

By Mindy Levine

It's 5 AM on the day this article is due, the absolute final deadline, and I have finally found time to write it. They know me at the Starbucks I am in (not the one in my town; I have to drive two towns over to find one that is open early enough), and they have my venti bold coffee with two pumps of white mocha waiting for me when I arrive. The time that I spend writing this article is precious time being taken away from the grant I am working on. That deadline is tomorrow; I have 36 more hours to write a 25-page research proposal. This is a snapshot into my life as a first-year assistant professor; this is a quiet week.

I hesitated to write a first-person account of what my first semester has been like, mostly because I do not want to scare people away from this profession. I like my job. I really like teaching: standing in front of a classroom and cracking jokes that nobody else thinks are funny just because I can. I like running chemistry experiments in the lab, especially when I don't know what is going to happen. I really like my colleagues, my department, and my boss.

But being a professor has been mostly about juggling tasks and prioritizing. The grant that is due tomorrow will be the 8<sup>th</sup> one that I have applied for since arriving at the University of Rhode Island. Each one has required an exorbitant amount of work – to design a research proposal, write a budget narrative, and fill out all of the mindnumbing forms that inevitably form part of the grant application. “What is your career development plan?” one recent application asked. How should I know? My career is just beginning.

Setting up a research lab from scratch has brought its own set of challenges. I have worked in a chemistry lab for nearly a decade, and not once have I needed to determine what grade of silica gel to order, or which TLC plates will perform adequately. I know I need monkey bars for the back of my hoods, but I am pretty sure they are not called “monkey bars,” and I can't find them in a catalogue anywhere. A vendor keeps suggesting that I need a chiller for my rotavap; having never run a rotavap with a cold water condenser, I have no idea if he is right or if he is just trying to up-sell me.

There is also the excitement. The excitement of getting my first graduate student is surpassed only by the realization that my two highly motivated undergraduate students have made substantial research progress during the semester. The excitement of visiting U Mass Dartmouth and talking with students and faculty members about my research program. The excitement of receiving an ACS Leadership Development Award and planning a trip to the Leadership Institute in January 2011.

Mostly being a professor is about being willing to work harder than I ever thought I could. In my particular case, my heavy workload is compounded by an hour-long daily commute; as half of a dual-career couple, I consider myself fortunate that my job is only 100 miles away from my spouse's. I almost never work between 4:30 and 8 pm at night, so as to spend time with my 15-month-old toddler and husband. But most other times are fair game for work: 6 am on Sunday morning, 3:30 am on a Tuesday morning, 11 pm on Thanksgiving night.

I wonder what my toddler will think of Mommy's job as he grows older. I hope he will understand that I am doing what I love: exploring, investigating, and teaching the exciting field of chemistry.