

# Life As An Assistant Professor: A Retrospective

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I remember when I thought that getting tenure was going to be my ticket to less work, that the days, nights, and weekends of seemingly endless work to obtain tenure was going to come to an end at some point in the not-so-distant future. It was that hope, partially, that nurtured me through six years of Assistant Professorship, from 2010 to 2016. That light at the end of the tunnel of getting tenure would make it all worth it, I figured, and soon that day would come.

Being an Assistant Professor was interesting, to say the least. During those six years of my life, I applied for more than 100 grants. Most of them were rejected; a few, just enough it seemed, were funded. The funds were enough to keep my laboratory of 4-6 graduate students running, were sometimes enough to host a postdoctoral research fellow for a short-term appointment, but were never quite enough to expand the group in any substantial way. The funding came from lots of small grants and a few big ones, including the one that probably made my tenure case successful: An NSF CAREER grant from the Division of Macromolecular, Supramolecular, and Nanochemistry, which I obtained on my third (and final) try, and which provided 5 years of substantial funding to support my research program.

The papers were rejected most of the time as well, with an average of 3 rejections before each paper was accepted. Keep submitting, I said to myself, and that mantra carried me to 27 peer-reviewed scientific publications in those six pre-tenure years. 27 publications, assuming 3 rejections per paper, meant that I had prepared and submitted my work 81 times.

And then, of course, there was the teaching and the service components of my job. The teaching was mostly straightforward, after the first year of working around the clock to prepare and deliver my advanced organic chemistry course for senior-level graduate students for the first time. Mostly I kept teaching that same class, although there was one semester where I taught 192 sophomore-level students who were majoring in biology, engineering, pharmaceutical sciences, nursing, animal sciences, and a seemingly endless array of other major fields of study, none of which were chemistry. “You don’t understand,” one student wrote on a mid-semester evaluation, which I distributed in order

to provide students with the opportunity to comment on my in-class performance. “We don’t really care about learning chemistry.” I understood.

The service, I knew, could take as much time as I let it, but I felt a deeprooted moral imperative to help the next generation of students succeed in science, especially for those students who identify as members of under-represented demographic groups. In the physical sciences, including chemistry, under-represented demographic groups in 2018 still includes anyone who is not a cis-gendered, heterosexual, able-bodied white man. Since that demographic description does not include me, my interest in broadening participation in science has a non-trivial personal component and self-interest as well. Other service of note included my work on the University Work-Life Committee, and my role in establishing a Professional Family Travel Fund to enable faculty and staff members to better balance professional and family caregiving responsibilities.

Personally, I needed as much help balancing professional and caregiving responsibilities as I could get. In parallel with establishing a lab, obtaining funding, publishing papers, teaching courses, and working for the service of the broader chemistry community, I was also parenting three high-energy children. The oldest, born in 2009 during my postdoctoral fellowship at MIT, was a precocious, hypervocal, and hyperactive toddler, then preschooler, and then elementary schooler, who over the course of his life has required non-trivial attention to address a variety of developmental issues. The middle one, born during my second year as an Assistant Professor, was an eczema-prone and highly allergic infant, who turned into an adorable toddler and preschooler, once the allergy issues were at least somewhat addressed. Being responsible for these two children during my second year as an Assistant Professor nearly caused me to quit my job, as I took a few weeks of vacation to evaluate whether I wanted to continue in academia. When the two weeks were up, I was in my Chair’s office with my decision. I needed the job, to stay engaged, to pursue research, to understand and learn more about science as often as I could. Staying home with my young children wasn’t a long-term option for me. I returned.

And then there was the third child, born in September 2014 during my last year before I submitted my tenure application. That child was the product of a dizzyingly complicated pregnancy, born together with her stillborn twin brother who suffered from a rare but fatal genetic defect. She was perfectly healthy, my baby girl, despite the complicated pregnancy, despite being born via emergency C-section at 35.5 weeks pregnant after I went into spontaneous, precipitous labor. I was home with her for 7 weeks before I returned, although I did not resume teaching until the following spring semester. Was it hard to be back at work? Sure, but it was certainly less hard than being home with a single infant when there should have been two.

So that's why being an Assistant Professor was stressful and tiring, and why even the act of recounting that time period for this article has made me exhausted by proxy. Why did I keep doing it though? Why couldn't I walk away in my second year, when I really, seriously, considered it? Because of the fun. Training and working with students in the laboratory, discovering new chemistry and phenomena that nobody had ever seen before, turning a "wouldn't it be nice if we could..." to "here is how we can do it" – all of that combined to make scientific research the most rewarding pursuit I have ever undertaken.

The teaching was fun, too, maybe because I just enjoyed hearing the sound of my own voice, but possibly also because of the joy of successfully communicating challenging topics to a student audience in a way that they understood. I am a chemistry professor because of inspiration from my undergraduate organic chemistry professor and the excitement he demonstrated for science. Maybe one of these students would become a chemistry professor because of me.

The science outreach component of service was similarly outstanding, as the participant thank-you notes underscored how much of an impact our efforts were really having. "Thank you for all you have done for XX," began one note from a parent of someone who participated in chemistry camp, our free, week-long outreach program for middle school girls throughout Rhode Island. "I wanted you to know that she talks about you non-stop and wants to grow up to be a scientist like you. Thank you for showing her that girls can do everything." "Do everything?" I questioned to myself. I am not sure of that, but at least we can try.

This is why I love my job, all of these reasons all at once, even with all the stresses that come with it as well. This is why when, even when my favorable tenure decision came with no reduction in workload and on the contrary, with a non-trivial workload increase, I was OK. More than OK, I now enjoy the job more than ever, especially at this moment, when I write this article from my sabbatical appointment in Israel more than 5000 miles away. This is why I couldn't walk away in 2012 to become a stay-at-home parent and take care of an infant and toddler, and why I am grateful every day that I am still here.