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Stuff that Works (and doesn't) about Being a Professor

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Things that have been useful in my career:

Give away your ideas: It is really a lot of fun to give ideas away.... Plus, if you are open about your ideas, your approach, and your interests, I think you will find people generally reciprocate. Don't be too worried about people swiping your best thoughts; just be sure you have lots of them so that you can afford to give some away or have people steal a few!

Above all, don't become a 'one trick pony' with one "good idea" that you defend for life. That's how people become bitter and isolated, particularly when some young Turk shows that the "good idea" was wrong! The fact is that almost all ideas (even the good ones) are half-baked and are inadequate in some way when confronted with new data. That doesn't mean you were wrong (at least completely), but that the world is much more interesting that most of our theories allow.

Be gracious: Don't be bitter when one of your ideas is trashed by somebody else. If your idea was good, by all means defend it. But also be ready to acknowledge that the "young Turk" was right and you were not. There is no fun in fighting with other people, even if they do (sort of) deserve it. Besides, you have enough good ideas that you do not need to defend the ones that might not have been all that good after all! Fighting diminishes everybody and can cause lasting, and destructive splits in departments, fields of study, and disciplines. I once heard an NSF program manager say that the reason igneous petrology imploded in terms of funding was that there were two camps that could never see the virtues in the other camp's research. Both ended up trashing each other and cutting funding to everyone!

Collaborate--it is just so much fun! Collaborations are a way to do stuff you could not do on your own. Collaborations usually get me to write stuff faster, be more proactive, and generally just keep cranking on the science-game. Work I am doing on my own can be delayed or I can get diverted onto other stuff whereas I have obligations to my collaborators that keep me on the straight-and-narrow.

Be active in all parts of the science game: As you mature in years, don't fall into the trap of giving all your good ideas to your students; or at least, save some of them for you to have a very active hand in the actual data collection. For a while in my career I spent most of my time designing experiments and editing student papers rather than collecting the data myself. Mistake!

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Travel: As a naturalist, I think it is very important to travel--see the varied ways the world works and try to appreciate how and why it differs from place to place. As a paleontologist I have come to realize that there are still remnants of the Paleozoic world in the here-and-now....even the Proterozoic! What a revelation!

Teach because it expands your view of your science and it a great justification for exploring how your work intersects with that of others on the edges (or outside) your field. When I was working at a soft-money institution, I had to write grants constantly and they were usually pretty narrow in focus. I found myself becoming increasingly narrow and specialized in my field. Moving to a teaching/research institution was great because teaching allowed me to see the connections between my field and all the allied fields. Much more fun!

Invest time in your students (including the undergrads and high school volunteers--you have more influence than you might think!and many of them will be friends for life.

Be enthusiastic: I am constantly impressed that enthusiasm will carry you places you cannot imagine. Everyone can be caught by enthusiasm, and if you are genuine about yours', you can drag an amazing collection of people along into your world and vision. People who are too serious or too reserved cannot pull this off and have to get by on the strength of their ideas (or having the fortune to have a popularizer pick up the ball).

Learn to communicate well: If you can get your enthusiasm and message across to people well outside your field, you are doing well. I think that it is increasingly important to be a good communicator and to reach out to people of all stripes. These include not only colleagues but also donors, funding agencies, and collaborators in other fields. And, they include the public, kids, and decision-makers because they may all have insights that you don't and they may also give you reasons for doing your work that you might not have thought of.

Find mentors: When you are young in the "Professor game" find more senior people to help you achieve your vision. You need them to show you how the game is played and to navigate the way things work at your institution and in your field. I think it is good to have several mentors because they all may contribute different things. The mentors can be people in fields completely unrelated to yours. You are looking for advice on the 'professor game' not just on your own field.

Pick your battles carefully and (in the context of university politics) work at the things you care about, not what other people think is important. For instance, I am personally appalled that there is, at my university, a "Committee of Committee's" (that is there to pick people to serve on other committees!).... Personally, I have focused on interdisciplinary education because, in my field of conservation, a key to success in conservation is to know not only the science, but also the economics, politics, communications and so on.... I also happen to find interdisciplinary thinking to be intellectually rewarding.





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Don't give too much time to the big "U": Actually, this was my father's dictum (and he was also a UC professor), but he is right. The University will take every drop of blood you give to it and will reward you with completely ephemeral things—like some brownie points in promotion, and perhaps service on more committees! Don't say yes to everything. You were trained (and got your job) because you are good scientist, not an administrator. There are some administration jobs worth doing (see above and below), but they are few and far between. The best is to work hard at the administrative things you care about and then tell the "Committee on Committee's" (when they come calling) that you are already overloaded with this, that, and the other thing and could not possibly take on whatever they are offering.

Build community: One exception to the above is that you should try to be a good actor for your colleagues in the university. You cannot always be selfish and do your own thing. Sometimes there are promotion files, admissions committees and other stuff that just has to be done and you can piss off your colleagues if you don't do your fair share. But, the trick is to calibrate your effort on University stuff so that you are not doing too much "junk work" (as a Japanese colleague memorably put it!). I have found serving on the "Committee for Academic Promotions" to be a useful way of figuring out if I was doing 'my fair share' or not.

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