

Letter to a Young Researcher

Matthew O. Howard

Dear X,

Although the decade of the 50s is said to be the youth of old age, I have noted that with its dawning intimations of mortality comes a nearly irrepressible impulse to offer unsolicited advice—a habit to which professors are, in any case, particularly disposed and that becomes increasingly pronounced the longer we remain in the business of professing. When offered condescendingly, without due consideration of the values and circumstances of the targeted recipient, by a person held in less than high esteem, or at a time when a student such as yourself is ill-prepared to consider it, advice-giving is often ineffective and even counterproductive. That said, good advice is a key component of quality mentoring. I am honored that you asked me for career advice that might enhance your development and ensure your professional success.

First, let us turn to your questions about doctoral education. You asked, “How should I spend my final two years in the doctoral program?” A few thoughts occur to me immediately. First, it is essential that you dedicate yourself to becoming a true expert in a relatively narrow but substantively important practice issue, such that when you leave the program you are fully conversant with the scientific literature in that area. Such study (which can include the reading of scores to hundreds of scientific reports) will provide invaluable exposure to the research designs, measures, statistical approaches, conceptual issues, and substantive conclusions in your chosen field of research. It is important that the area you select be relatively narrow, because science has grown so rapidly in recent decades that it can be well-nigh impossible to develop expertise in broad substantive domains. For example, there are thousands of alcohol dependence treatment outcome studies; thus, a more appropriate area in which to gain expertise might be brief motivational interventions for treatment of alcohol abuse and dependence. Some students will narrow their interests to a particular client subpopulation, such as pregnant women with

cocaine dependence. The end product of this study should be one or more published review articles addressing substantive findings and methodological issues in the selected area of study. This undertaking will also provide a useful introduction to a key orientation that the neophyte scientist should develop: All scientific work should result in published products. You are worried that you will not be able to identify a research question for your dissertation. I assure you that intensive study of published scientific reports in an appropriately selected area will yield more ideas for research than you know what to do with and knowledge of the methods by which to investigate them. Substantive expertise acquired during the doctoral years is an asset that researchers frequently draw on throughout their careers; conversely, failure to acquire such knowledge often constitutes a career-long impediment. In the future, you will be competing for grants and other professional opportunities with professionals who *do* possess such expertise.

It is also critical to consider the long-term implications of your choice of dissertation topic. An ideal topic is one that fits well within the purview of the profession, that is fundable over the near and long term, and that evidences some (but not too much) current research activity. It is easier to build on an existing body of research than to create one *de novo*, but heavily researched fields like delinquency or substance abuse can be hard to break into because the literatures are voluminous, and it can be difficult to determine what has and has not been done before.

In addition to substantive expertise, it is vital to acquire certain analytic and technical skills. During your final two years in our program, I recommend that you take a course or otherwise gain expertise in meta-analysis and related methods of data synthesis. Most schools of social work in this country currently lack significant research infrastructure. Meta-analyses can be conducted with virtually no infrastructural supports and are often highly cited and practically

influential. Further, there is growing appreciation for the role that data synthesis plays in scientific progress. It is also important to develop advanced statistical skills, including facility with a variety of latent variable approaches and application-level knowledge of multiple statistical software packages and their programming languages so that you can avail yourself of the multitudinous opportunities that currently exist for secondary data analyses. Secondary data analyses, like meta-analyses, require little infrastructure and, depending on the databases analyzed, can yield exceptionally well-received publications. A former doctoral student of mine and a junior colleague with whom I have frequently published have both averaged 20 to 25 high-quality publications annually using these methods. Such levels of productivity are virtually unprecedented in social work and reflect positively on the profession. Secondary analyses of large, high-quality data sets and meta-analyses are inexpensive research approaches that require scant infrastructure, but they do require advanced data-analytic and technical skills—now is the time to acquire them.

Finally, you have asked me which schools you should apply to for your first assistant professorship. The answer to this question depends critically on what you plan to do with your professional life, how you want to live, and the changing and often subterranean cultures of the schools themselves. My experience is that many doctoral students do not know much about their professors' lives and tend to think of their future academic positions as an extension of their student years. When these students witness the extensive hours most professors work, the demands of balancing teaching, research, and service, and the sacrifices professors make in their personal lives, many are no longer so enamored of their career choice. If you want to make research a central part of your career, know that you will be working long hours and will need to find a school that values research. There are hundreds of social work schools and departments, but few that support a highly active research life. Selection of the right school for your first position is critically important to your professional opportunities and personal happiness, so let's talk much more about these issues in the future.

You are wise to be thinking ahead to your first faculty position and to be considering the actions that might best promote your opportunities for success therein. Put briefly, my advice would be to

affiliate selectively, to build your CV strategically, to manage service obligations appropriately, to resist the urge to do mostly what you are good at, to be entrepreneurial, and to not be too much taken in by talk encouraging lifestyle balance.

Upon arrival at your first position, it is important to reach out and affiliate with research centers, institutes, and cognate departments on campus and nationally that engage in research relevant to your interests. Social work schools and departments are comparatively small and often comprise scholars with nonoverlapping research interests. Science today has become ever more team and specialist oriented; thus, it is important to find out who on campus is doing research in your area of interest and to seek them out. If you are employed at a school with a relatively weak research infrastructure, it can be useful to partner with a center or institute that can provide support and guidance for grant application development, pilot study monies, and the like. Perhaps most important, these sites can provide mentorship opportunities with people who possess the knowledge and experience to help you be successful in your funding and publication efforts. Typically, sad to say, these relationships in academia often have a quid pro quo nature; thus, if you hope to benefit from such a collaborative arrangement, it is important to think in advance about what you can provide the center, institute, or mentor professionally in return for their support. It can also be useful to seek a formal adjunct appointment to an academic department or professional school to facilitate collaborative relationships with professionals in these locations.

Building a CV strategically involves avoiding projects that consume significant quantities of time and effort but have uncertain or very long-term payoffs (or payoffs that are simply incommensurate with the effort invested). High-quality secondary analyses, meta-analyses, narrative reviews, and small original data-collection efforts can produce relatively rapid and bountiful returns on the time invested. Once 20 to 30 such publications have been amassed, it is advisable to consider an RO3 (small grant) or K01 (career development grant) application to the National Institutes of Health (if appropriate) or a proposal to a foundation or other state or federal funding body. These funding mechanisms can support primary data-collection activities in an investigator's specific area of interest. Early in your career, it is advisable to think in terms of discrete projects

that can be completed quickly and have a relatively high yield-to-effort ratio. Later in your career, you can take on more demanding, uncertain, and long-term projects at far less risk.

Managing service obligations is a key issue in schools of social work, which tend to be more service intensive than other academic departments and professional schools. If you seek external funding, you will be competing with many full-time scientists with no teaching or service obligations. Further, many of these scientists are operating in resource-rich environments with significant infrastructural supports—a situation untypical of social work. For these reasons, social work has not generally competed successfully for the most highly prized and generous research funding opportunities. It is vital that you do your part to support the service and teaching missions of your school or department *and* that you conserve as much time as possible for research.

As I said, it is critical to resist doing mostly what you are good at. Good teachers are inclined to expend significant energy on teaching, productive researchers are apt to prioritize research, and professionals dedicated to service tend to value meetings and positive organizational outcomes. Professorial life means doing many different things well—it is important to be an excellent instructor, an outstanding researcher, and an energetic supporter of the service mission of your department or school. Each of these roles involves different skill sets, and each takes away from the other. Time spent on teaching is time not spent writing an article, and time spent writing an article is time not spent attending a meeting. I have noted an insidious tendency on the part of many faculty members to be drawn to that which they love or are good at and neglect that which they are less good at or fond of. In the pretense years, this tendency (if not redressed) can be fatal to an academic career.

Finally, I encourage you to be entrepreneurial. Contact journal editors about manuscript reviewing possibilities, as these often lead (if you do a good job!) to invitations to join the editorial board in subsequent years. Take a risk and contact a national leader in your field to ask if there are any collaborative opportunities for publications or research. Run for political office within the profession, and promote research if you are fortunate enough to win. Along the way, many colleagues will encourage you to “balance” your personal and professional obligations, as if some optimal formula exists that

is valid for all people. Remember that many, if not most, great achievements were attained by people of intense and dedicated passions—if this is lack of balance, we have much to be grateful for it. The first six years of your research and professorial career are likely to be demanding and stressful, albeit deeply satisfying—the good things in life are rarely free—and you will need to work hard and be dedicated to excellence to survive. There will be plenty of time for balance and advice-giving when you get to your 50s! **SWR**

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