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Things I Wish I Knew at the Start of My Career in Academia

– July 1, 2019 **Posted in:** [Development Tr@k](#), [News and Announcements](#)

SPEAKERS

Murali Haran, professor and head of the department of statistics at Penn State University (statistics department in large research university); **Karen Bandeen-Roche**, Hurley Dorrier Professor and chair of the department of biostatistics at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (biostatistics department); and **Nicholas Horton**, Beitzel Professor of Technology and Society in the department of mathematics and statistics at Amherst College (selective liberal arts college) contributed as speakers for this event.

Looking for advice on how to best advance your statistics career in academia? What better way than to ask a few experienced and veteran statisticians what their journey has been like? What were the good decisions they think they made, and what lessons were learned along the way? What mistakes did they make, and how did they move forward?

This is exactly what the National Institute of Statistical Sciences (NISS) Academic Affiliates committee did. On April 23, three academics were invited from three disparate academic environments to share their thoughts about what is important to consider when you want to ensure a career path will be both successful and satisfying.

Think Beyond the First Few Years

Rather than focusing solely on the first few years—which for most people ends up being primarily about getting through tenure—think in terms of building a fulfilling career. Right from the beginning, junior faculty are strongly encouraged to become involved in activities that will help them do what they enjoy, which includes building collaborations within statistics and (depending on the individual's interests) with researchers in other disciplines. It is also important to be open to conversations with colleagues, give talks, attend seminars, travel to conferences, and contribute to your department and profession. These activities will become part of your professional identity. By being open and engaged, you are also more likely to work on interesting and innovative research topics. Of course, you should also make sure you spend enough time on activities that help you be productive, such as finishing research papers and regularly submitting grants.

It is important to understand that you need to be thoughtful about how you manage all your activities. A crucial skill of those whose careers have been successful is that they are able to temper their efforts by making good decisions regarding the following:

- Choosing which research projects to become involved in
- Managing time properly
- Learning from the examples of those who have come before them

There is a lot to navigate as a new faculty member, so it is valuable to have good mentors to help you along the way, especially with decisions.

Be Cognizant of Your Well-Being

If your body and mind are not on healthy tracks, it is difficult to achieve long-term satisfaction in any area. Doing everything on the list of expected accomplishments for yourself and everybody else

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might win you prestigious awards, but the emotional and physical toll can be devastating. Instead, try to steer yourself in healthier directions by taking health (all kinds) seriously, pursuing your own academic passions and interests, and finding time for nonacademic activities that are important to you.

It is not always easy to see when you are in this kind of trouble. For this reason, developing a career mentor—someone you can talk to and who will advise your involvement and activity—is key. It is possible to find such mentors at your university (they do not have to be in your department) or even outside your university. Professional societies can also be helpful for this (the American Statistical Association has mentoring programs).

All these strategies will help your career growth be much more sustainable. And if you do fall off track, don't despair. This happens more frequently than you may imagine. It absolutely is possible to recover and thrive!

Teaching the Next Generation

Being engrossed in your own line of research is important; however, being able to balance your research with good teaching is important at small institutions. Moreover, as a role model for your students, understanding the shift occurring in undergraduate institutions in terms of statistics and data science and being able to help articulate these changes into the curriculum is important. It is also important for your institution and the profession. Co-curricular opportunities such as DataFest and StatFest are examples of ways to help your students develop important skills and capacities, as well as demonstrate your passion for teaching, research, and the profession.

Takeaways

All three speakers spent time at the end of the session responding to questions from attendees, and the following takeaways were reemphasized:

- Make sure you build time into your schedule to work regularly on your own research (e.g., from 8–10 am, no email, no meetings, just research). Focus on your research at a time of day when your mind is the freshest.
- Learn by example (study successful grant applications; high-impact papers; or someone else's course notes, faculty report, and tenure dossier). This is time efficient and will help you do better with each of these tasks. Time management is an important part of being successful.
- Get mentors for different aspects of your career development (research, teaching, work-life balance). You need to be able to regularly turn to people you trust. They may be junior, senior, or outside your department. Identify good mentors—usually balanced/happy people, successful researchers, and good teachers. Don't wait for people to ask you.
- Work on research topics that are interesting to you. Get comments from friends and colleagues. Work on more than one subject area, but not too many. This reduces risk and also helps give you something to switch to when you are stuck.
- The publication process can be challenging, and revising and resubmitting a paper can be tedious. But virtually every revised paper is an improvement over the original. Listen to what reviewers say, make the changes you think are appropriate, and respond respectfully.
- Teaching well is central to your job and an important part of being a scholar. It clarifies your thinking about the field (this happens even when teaching the most basic courses), helps you learn to communicate clearly, and can even provide new research ideas. However, you shouldn't allow teaching to encroach upon protected research time. For instance, after a certain point, do not keep trying to improve your notes, slides, homework problems, etc.
- Work to identify grant programs well suited to your research. Ask mentors for comments or ideas for where to submit. The grant process can be frustrating, but perseverance is critical.
- Treat everyone with respect, including faculty, staff, and students. Remember that, even as junior faculty, you have the power to stand up for yourself. You can learn to be firm but polite; do not burn bridges.
- Everyone experiences professional and personal challenges, setbacks, and failures—persist and do not hesitate to seek out help when necessary.
- Get yourself out there. Go to conferences, give talks, be active in professional societies. These relationships you build outside the institution are valuable for career development and fulfillment. Professional involvement and service is ideal for overcoming shyness and honing networking skills.
- Above all, don't neglect your mental and physical health. It is important to make time for hobbies and relaxation. Try to achieve a work/life balance that works for you.

The NISS Academic Affiliates committee hosts several virtual meet-ups during the spring and fall semesters. Information about this [meet-up and previous and future events](#), including event recordings, is available on the NISS website.

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ADRIAN COLES chair of the Committee on Minorities in
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