

Welcome to Column 23 of Hey Jane! This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions and answers are generated by the committee and SWS members. Answers are compiled from several anonymous sources. All columns are archived on our committee's page on the SWS website <http://www.socwomen.org/page.php?ss=26>

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For this month's Hey Jane! Column I asked you to send me your "best" piece of advice. Thank you to everyone who responded. I've organized what you sent (with minimal editing) into topics for quick reference.

My personal top three "best" pieces of advice include:

1. Learn how to say no.
2. You will be the smartest person in the room during your dissertation defense.
3. Done is better than perfect.

As for number one on my list – I'm still learning the art of saying no. I've gotten to be pretty good at it when I'm asked to do something that does not seem interesting or useful to me at all. I'm still working on saying no to people I like and respect and when the task is compelling. The last two on my list probably require a bit of elaboration. They both worked well for me because of my own personal demons. When I was approaching my dissertation defense I was experiencing a lack of confidence. The person who told me I'd be "the smartest person in the room" meant that I would know more about my topic and my data than anyone else in the room. And it was true! Of course the people on my dissertation committee were all highly intelligent, but I needed to hear that I could hold my own with them. This probably wouldn't be a piece of advice you'd want to give to a student who has a tendency toward arrogance. "Done is better than perfect," is not intended as an excuse to turn in sloppy work. However, this bit of advice works well for people who are frozen by the desire for perfection. You'll notice that some of the pieces of advice below directly contradict each other. So, take what is useful for you and take some time to think about the person you are giving the advice to – is it the right advice for that person at that time?

ADVICE FOR UNDERGRADUATES:

My best bit of career advice came when I was a senior in college - I had applied to graduate schools and also to law schools, gotten into both and was trying to make up my mind. My political science professor asked me what was attractive about each option -- I said that law school seemed to be a route to self-support (since grad school led to the academic job market and in those days it was truly terrible) but the classes in grad school seemed more like fun to me. He urged me to do what I thought was fun "and when you can't afford to do that anymore OR it gets boring, then shift to something that seems more practical" I then got some good (not great, but ok) fellowships for grad school that allowed me to indulge myself for at least two years and after that I thought I'd have to bail out and head to law school. But I've been in sociology for over 25 years and haven't gotten bored yet! And I keep managing to pay my bills. My cousin, with whom I was close as a kid, made the opposite choice -- he's making a bazillion bucks as a drug

company lawyer -- but I have never once regretted following the fun rather than the money, and while I am not rich, I've never been poor since grad school either. It's the classic "do what you love and the money will follow" moral but it really is the best advice -- and vice versa: if you get bored and unhappy, quit! There are other routes to making a living, and you are never actually making a decision that you can't revoke if you decide the career really isn't fun for you after all.

One of the more interesting pieces of advice I received as an undergrad was to think less about one's major and more about the type of work you want to do. Otherwise you can end up like someone with a BA in history who hates teaching; what do they do next? There are, of course, a few other things to do with a history degree, but what if they are no more appealing to you than teaching? Then what? This advice was based on the idea that if you like teaching, you could probably teach several things--what you majored in, almost majored in, minored in, or a couple of your hobbies--and be happy. But if you study a subject and don't see a job that you will be happy at, you're in trouble. The other good advice I got, which is contradictory on the surface, but can be combined with the above, is even if you are clueless where it is going, just study what you are interested in--rocks, languages, music, whatever--and just go with that. The third piece of advice I found useful, was don't think about any of this stuff too much. Something like 80% of people are away from their major within five years of graduating (with a BA). Personally I just ignored the conventional advice and picked the area where I thought I could have the greatest effect (as an activist/organizer/etc.)

CHOOSING A SPECIALIZATION:

Go with your heart and passion. We don't make enough money to be in this business unless we really believe what we do matters. So choose to do what matters to you.

My best advice was NOT to do an interdisciplinary Ph.D. degree.... I have seen people pay the consequences of doing so.... you can still do Women's Studies within disciplinary departments. I see some of my students being encouraged to do Women and Gender Studies in graduate school and there are so few jobs out there.

Regarding choosing my area of specialization, as a graduate student I wanted to study sexualities. My graduate school advisor told me to pick an established field in sociology, learn to speak "mainstream" sociology, and then do more marginal sociology within that field. So I now identify myself as a family sociologist with a focus on gender and sexualities. I have a great tenure track job - and I'm not sure I would have gotten it without fitting squarely into the larger field. And I still study the sociology of sexualities.

THE JOB MARKET:

Get as broad a variety of experience in graduate school (research, teaching, advising, etc.) as possible.

Apply for jobs broadly.

This wasn't exactly advice, just an observation, but it helped me figure out my priorities about the job market. My undergrad advisor said once, "you have to like young people - really LIKE them -- in order to be good at this job" (and the job he was referring to was being a professor at a liberal arts college, as opposed to a Research I institution). When I was on the market and doing on-campus interviews I paid close attention to the way the faculty at different institutions spoke about their students. I took the job at the one place where everyone seemed to actually LIKE their students, and I have never regretted it.

As for the best career advice I ever got, I think it is a tie between two, the first from a dissertation committee member and the second from an informal mentor whom I met through a professional organization (not SWS). The first involved a decision I had to make between two job offers, neither of which was an ideal choice. I was advised to take the one with the lower teaching load and the teaching assignments closest to my research interests and to gear my publication productivity level to the type of institution where I would like to work. The advice was good and I was able to move from my first job to one that better suited me. I don't remember the exact wording of the advice from the informal mentor, but it basically was that to be successful and sane as an assistant professor in academia one needed to be always cognizant of the criteria by which one was being evaluated, but also "to thine own self be true..." If one strayed too much from one's core values and core interests in the quest to be successful, one would end up alienated and ineffective in the long run.

The best advice I was given came in a "job market" class at graduate school: Stay away from temporary lecturer positions, or visiting professor positions unless they are at the institution where you received your Ph.D.

The best advice I ever received was to *meticulously tailor* each job application to the school to which you are applying (and I don't mean just swapping out one sentence in your letter or reordering the paragraphs!). I spent more time than my peers preparing my application materials, but it really paid off. I came from a decent, but not great, school, and had a decent, but not great CV and I was invited for six campus interviews my first year on the market. It was absolutely the result of the extra time and care I put into those materials.

Regarding the job interview process, I was given three pieces of advice by graduate school professors: 1) Remember that you are interviewing the members of the committee as much as they are interviewing you - this may be your job for a long time; 2) You get an interview because you're qualified for the position. You get a job because of the chemistry between you and the committee members. Getting a job is as much about fit as it is about qualifications; 3) When someone on the search committee asks you if you can teach course "X", you should say yes.

TEACHING/MENTORING:

At a teaching university, I was advised, kindly and gently, that my students are not my reference group. Whatever students may appear to think of me (or may say to me

directly) has more to do with who they are than with who I may be. This advice really helped me to disengage from student response to the courses I teach. I spend 12 hours a week in a classroom and I am required (by contract) to post 4 hours per week of office hours. And students do expect that professors are available for a chat, a pep talk, a review session, all manner of things, even outside of posted office hours. So, remembering that my reference group does not include students allows me to keep some emotional distance and focus on my big-picture goals (for educating the next generation of sociologists, as well as my own research interests). Actually, I've found that I need emotional distance even from students who think I hung the moon. Most young people are still figuring things out and I try to avoid the seduction of being the "well-liked professor." I believe this supports my efforts to be the "respected professor" who offers students significant learning experiences.

As a graduate student I was being chastised for grade inflation. I was told that if you don't distinguish between "A" students and "B" students and "C" students and "F" students, in the long run you do the students a disservice. It took several years for that advice to truly sink in, but now I really appreciate it.

Any self-criticism you make in the classroom will show up on your student-teaching evaluations. For example, I used to occasionally say "I'm feeling frazzled" today and inevitably I would receive multiple written evaluations that said "she was often frazzled in class." It was the specific use of the word frazzled that clued me into the mimicking behavior of the students.

Always have multiple mentors. At different stages of your career you will need the advice of different people. Also, you can be a mentor at every stage of your career.

TIME MANAGEMENT AND BALANCING LIFE AND WORK:

My advice is: "Don't put second prize ahead of first prize." I think I made up that wording myself. But what I mean is, if you will regret never having children more than you will regret not getting tenure, then don't wait until after tenure to have kids. You can have both, but keep your priorities straight.

Syllabus prep will take as much time as you give to it. Therefore, resist the urge to revise your syllabus as soon as classes end in May. Put it away until two weeks before classes begin in the autumn. This will create at least two months of pure, uninterrupted time for you to work on your scholarship. I have adhered to this religiously and it has made ALL the difference. (As an aside I do a modified version of this over the winter break as well and it also works to create a good chunk of solid writing time).

As someone who let graduate school be all-consuming, when I became a tenure-track assistant professor, I made a conscious decision to live a balanced life. I took my work very seriously, but finally learned how to set boundaries. I chose to work from 9-5, Monday –Friday, and limit my attendance at evening lectures and events to no more than one per week. Of course there were times (grant deadlines, etc.) where I had to break my own rule, but sticking to this self-imposed rule 90% of the time, I was productive at work

and maintained my mental health. I achieved tenure and continue to apply this rule, although I now usually attend two evening events/lectures.

WORK HABITS, DECISION MAKING AND WORKPLACE POLITICS:

“Do not be defensive!” It was advice given for my job talks, but it has served me well in every presentational setting -- job talks, paper presentations at meetings and in the classroom.

After you finish a significant task or project big or small, PAUSE. Take some time -- whether 5 minutes, 5 hours, 5 days -- to acknowledge your achievement before moving straight into the next item on your list of things to do. There should ALWAYS be time to honor, even celebrate, your accomplishment, if only with a pause for a cup of tea.

Don't let a bad situation make you become someone you're not (i.e., petty, neurotic).

After you've faced a difficult situation, take a couple minutes and ask yourself, “If I had to do this over again, would I handle this differently, and if so, how?” Then mentally file it in a folder marked 'life experience' and *move on*.

When you say “no,” sometimes it helps to think of it as “No. Period.”

Don't say “I'm sorry” when you mean “excuse me.”

Something I'm fond of saying: “There are two sayings that can be applied to any situation: ‘Life is short’ and ‘Life is long.’ The challenge is knowing which one is called for in a given situation.”

One piece of sage advice I received from a professor/dean in graduate school was, politically speaking, to “pick and choose your battles” in the university environment.

“Stick to your knitting” meaning, don't spend too much energy worrying about departmental politics.

WRITING AND PUBLISHING:

Buy and use the book *Writing Your Dissertation in 15 Minutes a Day* (so that you don't become paralyzed at the enormity of the project).

Regarding my dissertation, my mother (who is an academic) said to me, “Your dissertation is a brick, not a castle. Finish your dissertation and then spend the rest of your career building your castle.”

“Nothing, absolutely nothing substitutes for high quality publications -- you can never make a ‘trade-off’ of this against anything else. Period.”

“One idea per article,” meaning pace yourself in terms of articles.

My graduate school advisor told me to publish often - book reviews, instructor manuals, anything to get my name out there and lines on my vitae. This was great advice - and if you can find a mentor to help you create such avenues for publication, all the better.

The best advice I think I ever got was to apply for every competition you see - campus syllabus competitions, theses, published and unpublished papers, books, and on and on.

Volunteer to be a reviewer for a journal in your area of study early in your career (ideally during graduate school). Reviewing journal articles and book manuscripts has helped me to become a much better writer.

One time after multiple revisions requested by the editor of a journal, I found that I no longer recognized my own ideas. A mentor advised me to “never let reviewers hijack your work.” In trying to appease several different reviewers, I had lost sight of what I wanted to say. Use the feedback of reviewers and editors to help make your ideas better, but don’t let them turn your ideas into something you’re not comfortable with. Rather, make the changes you find appropriate and then explain to the editor why you have decided not to make some of the suggested changes.

NETWORKING AND GETTING YOUR NAME OUT THERE:

My best professional advice came from my mother, a technical librarian. 1) Always attend your professional meetings and 2) Be on time.

Send copies of your publications to people who influenced your work or people you would like to read (and hopefully cite) your work.

If you are shy or find it difficult to meet people at conferences, start small – “I’m going to meet one new person today.”

If you want to get involved in a professional organization, go to section business meetings. Section chairs are ALWAYS looking for volunteers to organize sessions and serve on committees.

Even in our highly technological age, there is still value to the art of the phone call.

Nominate yourself for awards, desirable committees, and positions in professional organization.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This is my last Hey Jane! column. A new Jane will take over after the SWS winter meetings. This column could not happen without the help of many, many people. I promised confidentiality when I sought input for these columns, so I won’t mention any names, but I am truly grateful to all of the SWS members who have made this column possible. I have learned so much from all of you. During the time I have been writing this column, I have been through the tenure process, published a book, taken a sabbatical, and become chair of my department. At every stage and through each new challenge the

advice from SWS members (whether in this column or on the listserv) has been invaluable. Thank you!

CAVEAT to all professional advice: Always check with your departmental colleagues, chair, dean, etc. to find out what the norms and expectations are in your institution. And consult with your professional mentors to determine what is most appropriate in your specific situation.

I hope this helps!

-- Jane