

Overcoming transition shock: Things they don't tell you as a new faculty member

At an ATS seminar for new faculty members in October 2014, seasoned faculty and administrators reflected on the vocation of the theological educator and shared what they've learned so far. They offered a wealth of practical advice on surviving culture shock, time management, mentoring, tenure and promotion, teaching and research, writing, relations with the church, claiming institutional voice, building community, and more.



Cláudio Carvalhaes and Andrea C. White were two of the presenters at the new faculty seminar.

Andrea C. White from Candler School of Theology of Emory University offered a list of “things they don't tell you as a new faculty member.” The list was expanded in presentations by **Cláudio Carvalhaes** from McCormick Theological Seminary, **Israel Kumudzandu** from St. Paul School of Theology, and **Chris McAtee** from University of St. Mary of the Lake Mundelein Seminary.

- 1. Culture shock is institutional.** In transitioning from grad school to teaching, you leave behind your only frame of reference and may be surprised at how different it is, in terms of pedagogy, the expected emphasis on service, the immense time drain of daily interruptions, and the disappointment that no one in the classroom cares as much about your subject as you do.
- 2. Mentoring is essential.** It may be advisable to have more than one mentor, including someone outside the institution. In seeking out a mentor, don't ask for advice unless you're prepared to take it; to ask and then ignore could be politically dangerous. In serving as a mentor, establish boundaries and remember that a teacher is not a pastor.
- 3. Discover and pay attention to the unofficial guidelines for tenure and promotion.** Much of this will come through simply living in the institution and building relationships. But be assertive about it. Request an annual meeting with the dean, even if it's not a school policy, and keep an ongoing list of your activities in teaching, research, and service; keep a second list of everything to which you say “no.”
- 4. Guard your time for research and writing.** Schedule research time in your calendar as a nonnegotiable appointment, and learn to write in 30-minute blocks; that may well be the only time you can carve out of your schedule. Risk being unprepared by starting teaching and service tasks later in the summer in order to

make time for writing. Make writing part of your daily practice; otherwise, you will always be starting over.

5. **Make your conference papers count.** They support your research agenda and offer a built-in deadline. Write for a journal first, and then edit it for your oral presentation. That way, you've completed first the thing that carries the greater weight. Accept speaking invitations if they fit your research agenda, but give yourself a quota to avoid overload.
6. **Nurture your teaching.** Your teaching and research should coexist synergistically rather than competitively. Share your bibliography with your students in order to build a community of inquiry. Don't teach for good course evaluations; teach for good learning. Say "yes" to every opportunity for professional development as a teacher.
7. **Don't forget that you serve the church.** Connect what you are teaching to the work that students will be doing. Help them recognize that critical reflection about theology and the practice of ministry mutually inform one another.
8. **Claim your institutional voice.** Your identity as a new voice with outside perspective is an asset to the school. Value it as such.
9. **Build community.** Connect with your colleagues, and don't be intimidated. Remember that the beauty of overspecialization is that no one knows what you know. Be present, visible, and active in the life of the community, including with staff and students as well as faculty and administration. Engage with the school's mission trips.
10. **Commit to the mission of the institution.** Your vocation as a theological educator is inextricably wrapped up in it.
11. **Be intentional about carving out quality time with your family.** These are your greatest supporters.
12. **Attend to self-care.** The direction given at the beginning of every flight is accurate: You must put on your own oxygen mask before you can help others.

Carvalhaes discussed the experience of new faculty who represent minorities of either race or gender. He pointed out that faculty at ATS member schools do not reflect the demographics of North America or even of the student enrollment. (The latest ATS statistics indicate that full-time faculty at member schools are less than 20 percent minority and approximately 24 percent female.)

In sharing his own list of lessons learned—and challenges—from the perspective of minorities, Carvalhaes encouraged new faculty to embrace the "imposter syndrome" that commonly plagues them as a way to be real and honest. While institutions can be "cold and merciless" and the work of minorities not always embraced, he argued, "the convoluted brokenness of theological education will continue to challenge us and create both limitations and opportunities." "We have a lot of power," he said, "and we can use this power to make changes."

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SEMINAR VIDEO CLIPS

Andrea White, [Advice for new faculty](#) (33:30)

Cláudio Carvalhaes, [90 seconds of encouragement](#) (1:29)

Cláudio Carvalhaes, [Advice for new minority faculty](#) (17:21)