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## Essay on how new faculty members can deal with impostor syndrome

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Tyro Tracts  
Walk Like a Duck  
August 20, 2012 - 3:00am

### By

[Nate Kreuter](#)

Despite all of the doom and gloom about the academic job market, much of it warranted, many newly defended Ph.D. candidates will soon take up posts as assistant professors this fall. Many others will join the non-tenure-track ranks in a variety of positions.

If there is a near-universal source of anxiety for newly minted Ph.D.s and newly appointed academics, it is the [impostor syndrome](#), the lurking, sinking, throbbing feeling that they will soon be exposed for the intellectual and professional frauds that they sometimes suspect themselves of being. If you too sometimes find yourself faced with the self-doubt of impostor syndrome, you aren't alone. Such feelings typically begin in graduate school, which provides no shortage of opportunities for self-doubt, and come to a boil in the first year(s) of an individual's first tenure-track appointment.

I can imagine that postdoctoral appointments (not terribly common in my own discipline, but common in

others) might actually curb such anxieties, as they provide a more gradual transition between graduate school and the professorial ranks. Unfortunately, though, the transition from graduate student to faculty member is, and probably always will be, abrupt. And one of the common symptoms of the abruptness of suddenly having many more and new responsibilities, most of which graduate students are never formally prepared for, is the worry, "Do I belong here?" Add in the weight, if one is in a permanent position, of the pressure to achieve tenure, which is tremendous, and any nagging cracks of self-doubt have the potential to widen.

If, when you attend that first faculty meeting, or address that first graduate course, you find yourself wondering, "Do I belong here?" don't worry about it — if you're there, then belong there. It really is that simple.

The long odds that successful job candidates have to overcome can also cause of sort of professional survivor's guilt. Every candidate who lands a job inevitably has equally intelligent and able friends from their graduate student cohort who have, during the same period, been unable to secure employment, or are underemployed. The differences between those who are able to secure a job and those who are not are sometimes undetectable, which can make the hiring process feel capricious, random, and ultimately unfair. This professional survivor's guilt can also contribute to the self-doubt that is almost inevitable when a hire takes up her first appointment.

It would be more disturbing to me personally if someone told me that they had never once experienced the self-doubt of wondering in their dark hours if perhaps they had simply pulled off a good ruse, by fooling both a dissertation committee and a hiring committee into credentialing and appointing them. I wouldn't believe them. Virtually every professor whom I am close to has admitted to me that at one point or another, at least momentarily, they worried deeply and seriously that they were not cut out for academe, that their work and ideas were bunk masquerading as knowledge. And not only young assistant professors but also full professors with multiple published books and volumes of journal articles have admitted as much to me.

Of course, self-doubt can be psychologically crippling if it is persistent, but if it is only occasional, I think it is more an indicator of the humility that rigorous, honest scholarship in all fields requires. Periods of self-doubt are common, and maybe just part of the gig, at least in the beginning.

While there is much to be said for confidence, and indeed confidence is a required element for the risk-taking that should drive a successful academic career, there is a big difference between confidence and arrogance. But arrogance is no antidote. Many newly appointed professors make the mistake of overcompensation, masking their (justified and understandable) insecurity behind an armor of arrogance. Hopefully needless to say, this attitude wins them no new friends, and starts the appointment off on the wrong foot. Your new colleagues want to hear your ideas, want for you to bring in your expertise and help shape the department, but they don't want to hear how everything they do is wrong, and how much better your graduate institution was.

In your new appointment, humility will take you far.

But feelings of self-doubt typically manifest themselves in far less existential ways as well. Day-to-day tasks, the simple routines of the professoriate, are initially foreign to newly appointed faculty members. In graduate school we learn how to conduct research relevant to the discipline, and hopefully we are also taught the discipline's pedagogical practices, but we are rarely taught how to do the job, the work, of being a professor. Unfortunately.

During the first year of your appointment, you will be amazed by how much energy is leached away from

you by the silliest tasks, figuring out where to pick up a key, how to find a meeting, how to set up an account, whom to ask what. There is no way around such difficulties, but this is why the first year is the hardest, and you should never forget that the first year is the hardest. Remind yourself of it, often.

And you should do much asking — there will be so, so much that you won't know about your new institution, about how it conducts its business. You can't possibly ask too many questions. Find a mentor, and ask her everything you can think of. Pick up your phone and call her office when you need to. Find more friends among the faculty, and ask them questions too. Go eat lunch in the faculty lounge, and listen, and ask questions while you are there. Shake hands with the other new hires during your new faculty orientation, and when something comes up, ask them questions too. Asking questions, frequently, may be the most important part of your first year on the job, especially if you are fortunate enough to be on the tenure track.

In no other place does the newly appointed assistant professor feel the impostor syndrome as acutely, I suspect, as in teaching graduate courses. In many cases a newly appointed assistant professor may be very close to the graduate students in age. In programs or fields that attract older students (euphemistically referred to as “nontraditional,” even at the graduate level), the neophyte professor may even be younger than many of his students. My advice when dealing graduate students is to admit the things you don't know, and stand firm on those that you do. Graduate students —and you know this because you recently were one — have a highly tuned ability to detect bullshit. They deal in it. So don't throw any on the departmental pile.

If you want to be a duck, walk like a duck. If you want to be a professor.... Well, if you want to be a professor, then I shouldn't need to fill in the blanks for you.

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