

## EXPERIENCE EXCHANGE

# Pre-tenures remain survival wise: How to survive your first year in a tenure-track nursing faculty position

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** There are many challenges when starting a nursing tenure track position. This experience exchange paper reflects on a pre-tenured faculty member's experience during their first year in their position in a university setting.

**Methods:** Tips for surviving the first year of a pre-tenured faculty position using Grylls' four survival priorities are reflected. Bear Grylls' advice for outdoor survival adventures can be applied to academia. The survival priorities of Protection, Rescue, Shelter and Water (Food) (or Pre-tenures Remain Survival Wise) are discussed in terms of knowledge gained, development of relationships and the pursuit of opportunities and resources available.

**Results:** It is essential to maintain a positive attitude and learn as much as possible to launch an academic career successfully. Practical tips are explored and exchanged.

**Conclusions:** It is important contemplate in this academic survival scenario, enacting in nursing tenure-track position, the concept of the Darwinian theory of evolution. Reminding us the continued existence of organisms that are best adapted to their environment, with the extinction of others who are not. There is a need to be flexible, resourceful and open-minded when entering academic position.

**Key Words:** Tenure-track, Faculty, Nursing, Post-secondary education, Change

## 1. INTRODUCTION

While more than 70% of full-time early-career faculty in tenure stream positions in Canada perceive the academic workplace as reasonably positive and supportive, and report a high level of work satisfaction,<sup>[1]</sup> launching an academic career can be stressful and poses many challenges. After watching British adventurer Edward Michael "Bear" Grylls' *Escape from Hell*<sup>[2]</sup> on the Discovery Channel, a wilderness survival television series based on true stories of ordinary people trapped in extraordinary situations, it became apparent to the author that Grylls' advice could be applied to other life adventures. His main message, presented in each episode,

is to 'keep your wits about you', which can be interpreted to mean: maintain focus, and attend to Protection, Rescue, Shelter and Water (Food). The author would like to share tips for coping during her first year of a pre-tenured faculty position, using Grylls' four survival priorities.

## 2. ACADEMIA SURVIVAL PRIORITIES

Academia can be as wild as Mother Nature in its forms of unforgiveness; while providing adrenaline rushes at times, it can seem to be a series of evaluations, rejections, and competitions, with the odd relief of success and accomplishment—perhaps just enough of the latter to keep one deter-

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mined to continue and to face the next challenge. It is critical to manage any anxieties and maintain a positive attitude.

### 2.1 Protection

First, it's important that you have Protection.<sup>[2]</sup> You need to consider your immediate surroundings, assess your threats and how you can protect yourself. The author recalls the completely overwhelming feeling of 'what to do first?' when she entered her office on the first day. Once her wits returned, the author's search began . . . get the necessities, such as keys, employee number, and computer equipment. The author was on her own in arranging to get her university ID card, human resources paperwork, health and safety training, and even office supplies. The author realized she felt just as if she was lost in the wilderness, and needed to orientate herself to the environment and priority needs.

The author found the faculty association (union) orientation very helpful, introducing her to the policies, expectations and rights as a faculty member. Next, the university Learning and Teaching Office offered two orientations and several teaching workshops during the year, along with a university faculty conference in May. The author started working on attaining a teaching certificate offered through her university's teaching development program, which provided her with practical teaching skills, encouraged her to reflect on her teaching, and was a great opportunity to meet with peers from other disciplines and become connected to the broader university teaching and learning community. The author engaged in discussion of pedagogical issues and, through workshops and seminars, was able to apply new practical skills related to post-secondary education. Feedback from the program facilitator and a review of her teaching dossier helped the author build a portfolio showcasing her teaching goals, abilities, methods applied, and accomplishments. The author also attended the orientation sessions offered by the administration to learn about the opportunities and research assistance provided at her university. Knowledge is your Protection, and the more you know about the environment in which you work, the more likely you will thrive.

### 2.2 Rescue

Second, according to Gyrlls, you need to plan how you can be Rescued.<sup>[2]</sup> It is important that you develop relationships within your faculty, department, or school. The author started her position at the same time as two other new faculty members. They depended on each other to pass on important information that they may have missed or did not know about (e.g., expectations around research and teaching effectiveness are not always clearly stated). This was her first line of support. The author also found mentors on an individual

basis, individuals with different types of expertise: she relied on one for research support, and another for teaching tips. The author found that she could discuss and seek advice from these individuals, and sometimes she could even help them out. The author's faculty includes a Teaching Chair who provides guidance and workshops on teaching issues; she has approached this person for assistance with teaching assessments, evaluations, student issues, and resources. It is worthwhile to become acquainted with administrative staff; they are another lifeline, very knowledgeable about the processes, behind-the-scenes work, and background about your new work environment. It is important to appreciate their work and contribution. Finally, the author suggests it is important that you develop good relations with students by having regular office hours and being available to help and listen to their concerns, but also to seek feedback to improve their overall experience. After all, you are ultimately in your position to educate the next generation of students. Gazza<sup>[3]</sup> found that making a difference in the student, profession, and the world was a major theme uncovered by a hermeneutic phenomenological study to understand the experience of being a full-time nursing faculty member (average years of experience 6.1 years) in a baccalaureate nursing program.

### 2.3 Shelter

Shelter is Gyrlls' third priority,<sup>[2]</sup> which the author interpreted as establishing relationships for sustenance, as well as instrumental support. The author was invited to join a faculty mentorship circle which became a sanctuary for discussion of pre-tenure issues in a friendly environment with pre-tenure faculty members from several disciplines and departments, and provided a comfortable, safe space to discuss concerns and socialize with others in a similar situation, and to hear from mentors with more experience who have travelled the same path. The author was able to discuss her challenges, hopes and fears with this group, while learning about the tenure process; she even participated in a panel about this mentoring experience at a university conference to describe its benefits. Sharing experiences and building support to endure challenges is essential to survive in a new academic environment. Jacelon, Zucker, Staccarini and Hememan<sup>[4]</sup> used a peer mentoring program where new faculty members mentor each other. This strategy allowed for relationship building among diverse faculty members, collaboration on research projects, camaraderie among members, success in individual and collective scholarship productivity, and improved mutual expertise.

### 2.4 Water (Food)–Sustenance

Gyrlls' fourth priority is to locate sustenance through a water source and food,<sup>[2]</sup> in other words, basic resources for de-

veloping excellence as a teacher and researcher. The author found many opportunities for this, such as internal university grants for travel, publication and research; assistance for preparing grant applications; and 'writing circles' that encourage writing for publication, with workshops on related topics and offer attendees professional editorial support to prepare manuscripts for submission. The author was very fortunate to receive internal grant funds and feedback to prepare applications for external grants to pursue her program of research.

It is also important to negotiate startup funds to support the development of your program of research and teaching development. Make use of your professional development funds and/or support and develop innovative teaching skills to support student learning.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Academia can place new tenure-track nursing faculty into survival mode; however we must be reminded of the concept of the Darwinian theory of evolution.<sup>[5]</sup> This theory asserts natural selection, the continued existence of organisms that are best adapted to their environment, with the extinction of others who are not.<sup>[5]</sup> We must be adaptable to change. Grylls' advice for outdoor survival adventures<sup>[2]</sup> can be applied to academia and show the importance of being adaptable to change. The survival priorities of Protection, Rescue, Shelter and Water (Food) (or Pre-tenures Remain

Survival Wise) were discussed in terms of knowledge gained, development of relationships and the pursuit of opportunities and resources available.

The author recommends that new faculty focus on maintaining good mental health, an issue not always acknowledged in academia,<sup>[6]</sup> and learn as much as possible about the expectations and supports in their new environment to launch an academic career successfully. The author made it through her first year with much help and determination. She gained the necessary knowledge, developed relationships with the instrumental people, and pursued all opportunities and resources available through the university, faculty and school.

She also had much support from her family who understands what she has worked for all her life. There have been many sacrifices to attain the position she is in but she is very privileged to have this opportunity. It is important to acknowledge this fact. The author will continue to pursue the path to tenure with dogged determination. She leaves you with this message "Pre-tenures Remain Survival Wise".

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