Advice

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A Scientist's Guide to Academic Etiquette

By Female Science Professor

For some reason, academics are not particularly famous for having well-developed social skills, although I don't think we are any more or less socially adept than nonacademics. The shy, awkward professor is a stereotype, although one can, from time to time, see how it might have come about.

Even so, academics can be quite aggressive, especially when it comes to research. Faculty positions and grants are difficult to obtain, we are rewarded for publishing a lot, and our universities seem quite pleased when our work generates public attention (of the positive sort). All of those factors combine to produce a culture that rewards highly assertive faculty members.

The awkwardness and occasional hostility that may arise among scholars in competitive fields gets even more complicated when members of an underrepresented group (such as women in the physical sciences, engineering, and math) are added to the mix. You end up with a rather long list of situations in which people might not behave as well as they could.

In the years that I have been blogging, I have written about some of the situations in which we academics are impolite to each other, and offered suggestions for how we might get along better. I started numbering the examples, at first with randomly assigned, absurdly high numbers, as if they were items in a long nonexistent document called "FSP's Guide to Academic Etiquette." Eventually I collected all of those scenarios together and gave them real numbers. I hereby share my existing list, with the addition of some new items.

A cursory glance shows that this is by no means a comprehensive list of all the things one might want or need to know to navigate the academic world. Furthermore, some of these tips are more useful than others, some are more serious than others, and more than a few focus on the extremes of academic behavior. All of them are based on actual experiences. On to the list:
1. **For interviewees:** During your campus interview, don't give different, completely inconsistent answers to different people depending on your perception of their position in the department or university hierarchy. If you are aggressive with female assistant professors ("I am not interested in teaching. I intend to hire five postdocs and focus on research. So, how many grants do you have?"), but unctuous with the senior male professors ("Teaching is a major priority for me, and I plan to involve students in my research."), that discrepancy might be discovered. We do talk about you after you're gone. And since this example (like the others) is based on a true story, I can report that such behavior may not be viewed favorably.

2. **For interviewees:** If, for some reason, you absolutely must bring your significant other to an interview, including to social events with members of the hiring committee, don't smooch, call each other cute nicknames, and/or feed each other during the dinner. The hiring committee may well comprised people with families and interests outside work, but they may nevertheless be disturbed by that behavior.

3. **For faculty interviewers:** Don't ask illegal and unethical questions. If you don't know what is permissible, find out in advance.

4. **For faculty interviewers:** Imagine that the person you are interviewing might one day be your colleague. Don't alienate the candidate from the start. Be polite and professional, and don't look at your watch every few minutes during the conversation.

5. **For male faculty interviewers:** Don't say to a female candidate for a faculty position: "I don't know what we are supposed to talk about. I can tell you that my wife likes living here. She likes the schools, she has a nice garden, and the humidity makes her hair curly." Don't say anything that strongly suggests that you don't know how to have a professional conversation with a woman.

6. **For department chairs:** Don't start your meeting with a candidate by listing the previous faculty members who have been denied tenure.

7. **For department or search-committee chairs:** When you have made a decision, let the unsuccessful candidates know the outcome. Don't assume they will guess the outcome if they don't hear any news from you.

8. **For applicants:** After determining that someone is willing to write a letter of reference for you, provide the necessary information in an organized way—well in advance of the deadline.

9. **For applicants:** If someone writes a letter of reference for you, let them know the outcome of your applications, or at least ask if they want to be informed.

10. **For students and postdocs:** If you are paid a salary, you should do the work.
11. **For students visiting professors, even during office hours:** If you are going to ask a professor a question and you need to refer to your notes or a book, have them within easy reach, with the relevant pages marked. Don't spend the first few minutes searching through your backpack and your giant folders covered with skull doodles only to realize that you left the desired item at home and have no idea what your question was, so instead you just ask the professor if you missed anything important in the class session you skipped because you overslept.

12. **For students visiting professors, even outside of office hours:** If the professor is dining al desco, an activity typically done to save time on a busy day, don't ask, "Are you busy?" The answer is yes. Ask instead, "Do you have a few minutes to talk, or should I come back at a better time?"

13. **For students:** Don't call male faculty members "Professor" or "Dr.," and then call female professors by their first names—unless you know that the female professor wants to be called by her first name.

14. **For everyone:** Run a spell checker before giving someone a manuscript or other document to read.

15. **For authors:** Before submitting anything for review, notify all of the co-authors and give them a chance to comment on the manuscript that bears their names. This is an ethics issue, not an etiquette matter.

16. **For co-authors:** If you are a co-author, you should respond in a timely way to requests for comments, or at least provide some communication to work out a reasonable time frame within which you can provide input.

17. **For co-authors:** Don't force people to add your name to papers if your contributions were minimal to nonexistent.

18. **For readers:** Don't assume that a paper is written by a man and then express great surprise when you meet the female author. Comments such as, "I thought you must be a man because you published a lot of interesting papers" will not be viewed as compliments by some women.

19. **For reviewers:** When writing a review, even if you think the authors are wrong or have incorrectly and inadequately cited your work, or you don't like their data or their font or their interpretations or the way that they say that your work is flawed, write your criticisms in a constructive and professional way.

20. **For researchers:** Don't steal ideas. Get your own ideas, or collaborate.

21. **For people introducing a speaker:** Before the talk, ask speakers if they have a preference about what is said during their introduction. Some people won't, but some may have preferences about what to mention (dates, places, awards, crimes).
22. **For speakers:** If you are scheduled to give a talk of a certain length, don't speak for significantly more than that amount of time.

23. **For everyone:** Thank people who help you, even if it is their job to do so, or you think it is their job to do so. There is a chance that you may be misinformed.

24. **For advisers:** Don't assume that a student or postdoc lacks ambition just because they don't want to be a professor at a big research university.

25. **For advisers:** Don't boast about firing graduate students. It is unseemly. You don't have to keep it a secret, but don't use those incidents to establish your hard-core credentials.

26. **For professors:** If you don't like another professor, don't take your dislike out on their students and postdocs.

27. **For anyone who attends faculty meetings:** Don't make faculty meetings last longer than necessary unless you have something really important to say.

28. **For everyone, especially students:** Don't ask someone if they are a "real" professor.

29. **For everyone who attends conferences:** If you see someone you want to talk to at a conference and that person is already in a conversation, try to join in, or ask politely if you can interrupt. Do not simply start talking as if the other person doesn't exist.

30. **For everyone:** Don't tell your adviser, colleagues, or students what your therapist says about them.

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