

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## Manage Your Career

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### Self-Sabotage in the Academic Career

15 ways in which faculty members harm their own futures, often without knowing it

*By Robert J. Sternberg*

Pogo recognized long ago that we often are our own worst enemies. Sure, he was a cartoon character, but he had a point—especially in higher education, where self-sabotage seems to be a standard characteristic of academic careers. In my 30 years as a professor, five years as a dean, and three years as a provost, I have observed many academics harm their own careers, often without realizing it. Here are 15 ways in which you can be most self-destructive.

**1. You don't seek out multiple mentors.** Too many faculty members sit back and wait for guidance and advice from their department heads or promotion committees. Successful academics, early in their careers, look for several mentors, including from departments other than their own. No one person or committee can be relied on to give you definitive career advice. In the end, you need to seek out multiple sources of advice, sort the good from the bad, and take responsibility for your own career development.

**2. You don't seek out external evaluations.** For some academics, the first time they get any sort of formal external feedback is during a tenure review. Guess what: That's too late. You need to pursue multiple external evaluations of your work early in your career—via reviews of your articles and grant proposals, colleagues in your field to whom you send your work for comments, and people who listen to you give talks. If you wait until tenure time, you are setting yourself up to fail.

**3. You are either perfectionist or perfunctory in putting your work into print.** Everyone wants to write the perfect article or

book, but no one ever does. The longer you wait to publish, the more likely someone else will beat you to press with the same idea, and the less likely you will be to find a publication outlet in time for gaining credit from a promotion committee. Moreover, many kinds of research go out of date quickly. Wait too long, and you court your own doom. But if you rush stuff into print, you will find yourself getting rejections and revise-and-resubmit notices, which also can hold up your bid to build your CV in time for its consideration by a promotion committee. Do your best on an article or book, but don't wait for Godot: Get it out promptly. And remember that, in any good institution, quantity matters, but quality, visibility, and impact matter more.

**4. Did you hold on to revisions too long? Or rush them out?** Very few articles are accepted on the first go-round with a publisher. Normally you can expect to do one or more revisions, whether for a book, article, or grant proposal. If you hold onto revisions too long, you will stifle your career. Editors and grant-review panels change, so you may find that the people evaluating your work later are looking for different things than were those who reviewed it earlier. Many of your revisions then may end up being in vain. So don't wait long in revising your work. But don't rush it out, either, lest it look like you failed to pay attention to the critiques. And if you disagree with the critiques, say why. Don't just blow them off, or your editor and reviewers are likely to do the same to you and your work.

**5. You pay too much attention to personal relationships—or too little.** Some early-career academics get so involved in their work that they ignore personal relationships with colleagues in their department. Or they act rudely toward others, believing that career success depends only on the quality of their work. Wrong on both counts. Whether departments admit it or not, they prefer to promote people who fit in—who contribute to the life of the department and of the institution. The person who is seen as a good fit will always have an edge over the misfit. But it also can be a mistake to devote so much time to personal relationships that your investment in those relationships is at the expense of your work.

**6. You fail to understand the cultural norms of your institution.**

What counts for promotion differs from one institution to another, and what is written in the promotion guidelines sometimes fails to capture what is most important for success. You need informal knowledge of the cultural norms of your institution, not just formal knowledge of the promotion requirements. It's important to be alert to the tacit, or unspoken, knowledge that only experience can teach you, lest you come up for promotion and meet the formal guidelines while falling short on the informal ones.

**7. You aren't well known outside your institution.** Important people in your field who are external to your own institution must know who you are, because they are the ones who will be asked to write about you at tenure or promotion time. Of course, a strong internal reputation is important, too. When tenure candidates, asked to recommend external letter writers, have no names to offer, that is a bad sign.

**8. You lack resilience in the face of failure.** In any academic career, the question is not whether you are going to have failures; the question is what you are going to do when you fail. You will have articles, book manuscripts, and grant proposals turned down; courses that are poorly received; talks for which audiences give you the cold shoulder. Academic careers are not for the faint of heart. In my experience, the people who are most successful in academe are reasonably smart and at least somewhat creative, but more important, they persist in the face of obstacles. Failed academics may be smart and creative but, when challenged, give up or become embittered.

**9. You've been involved in one too many intradepartmental squabbles.** Stay out of them if at all possible. Wait until you are tenured or, better yet, skip them altogether. You have better things to do with your time. If senior professors try to involve you, demur if you can.

**10. You are too selfish or too selfless.** Department members quickly pick up on selfishness in a new hire. It will not shock you to learn that, regardless of academic prowess, people generally do

not want selfish colleagues around. They are the ones who never have time for others and, when they do, hog credit or, worse, steal ideas. It is equally risky to be too selfless. You want a reputation as helpful, but you can't afford to let your own work go undone while you spend time helping others. Especially at risk are academics with technical skills. It is very hard to get promoted on the basis of the technical skills you used to help your colleagues.

**11. You got stuck on your dissertation paradigm.** Academic careers falter if they resemble one-act plays. By the time you come up for tenure, you need to be, at the very least, starting your second act—a second book, a new research paradigm, a new topic for your research, new course preparations. If you are seen as a one-idea kind of academic, you will be viewed as a bad tenure risk. And indeed, you are.

**12. You collaborate too much with colleagues from graduate school or your postdoctoral years.** You are expected, as a new faculty member, to show increasing independence. Don't make the mistake of getting sucked into extended, intense collaborations with your graduate or postdoctoral mentors or collaborators. The message you will send in doing so is that you never achieved the independence that will identify you as having embarked on your own career. Some collaboration with them is fine, but limit it.

**13. You fail to have a coherent research program.** You need a certain quantity of published research, but you also need a rational and organized research program. If there is no consistent theme, or perhaps pair of themes, professors will wonder if you have a meaningful future as an investigator, or if you are merely someone who flits from project to project, aimlessly pursuing investigations.

**14. You are guilty of any form of academic dishonesty.** If you are caught in any form of academic cheating, there is a single word to describe your career: over. It is very difficult to recover from verified academic dishonesty. Don't go down that road.

**15. You haven't figured out who you are.** As an academic, if you

try to please everyone, you will please no one. So figure out what you do best and capitalize on it. Correct or compensate for the things you don't do well. No one is good at everything. Make sure you are good enough at everything on which you will be evaluated, and really good on some of those things.

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