

Deb Risisky

Postdoc Department - Department of Psychiatry
Postdoc Ended: June 2007
Interview date: 11/08/07

Current Title: Assistant Professor of Public Health

Institution: Dept. of Public Health, Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven

Describe a typical day?

Oh, where to start! As a new professor with a full teaching load, all my days seems like a blur. At my institution, faculty members are unionized and we have to teach a total of 24 credit hours per year. Currently I am teaching a six-credit class for upperclassmen, a three-credit intro class, and have three students working on their thesis/culminating projects (.5 credit/student for 10.5 credits this semester). I taught the three-credit class over 10 years, so I have outlines to recreate my lectures from – including class activities. My six-credit class is completely new so it takes hours to create each 2-hour class lesson. My typical day is to come in early and work on class preparation – lectures, activities used – as well as take care of student issues. Then I teach my two hour class and come back for more office hours or meetings. I teach everyday and during the mid-point of the day, so I am here a lot. I have already been put on a few departmental committees and continue to get added to more committees as needed. After dinner, I am often grading exams or papers at home as it is too difficult to do at the office with interruptions. Right now, I also need to work at least one day per weekend to stay on top of my current load.

What do you enjoy most?

Being in the classroom – for all the work and chaos my life seems to be in during this adjustment period – I absolutely love it! The students are great and responding well to the courses – they are working hard and participating in the classroom activities. My goal was to find a position with a heavy teaching load and I found it. I was hired to teach my fantasy class, Program Planning and Evaluation, at both the undergraduate and master's level.

Totally unrelated to work, I actually grew up in this state but have been living in the Southeast for the last 15 years (which I loved). However, I forgot what the fall is supposed to look like – the leaves have been stunning and the hiking has been fabulous! I am working hard to find balance in my week.

What are some of the challenges?

1. Time

- a. *Management – I seem to never be able to catch up and get more than 2 days ahead. I know this will change in the future as I get more settled and have my courses more developed (18 of my 24 annual credits should remain constant).*
- b. *Research – I was given a small amount of seed money that they want me to use for research without any release time, so there is pressure to figure out when/how to use it. It also requires that I get out and start meeting people throughout the state, to which I am new to the area. Finding time to meet with people has been hard with my schedule, but I am taking small baby steps to try.*

2. Students

- a. *Class size – my six-credit class was capped at 30 and there are 38 students in there, which for an intense, skill-based course is very challenging. My other class also has almost 40 students.*
- b. *Southern students are different from other institutions I have been at previously. Many of the students are non-traditional, where they commute from a distance, work full time while taking full loads, already have families, and/or are a bit older than the traditional student. It is a different mindset from what I expected and have had to re-think some things in order to adapt to their needs.*
- c. *Students have changed from 10 years ago, and a small few seem to think that they should just be given good grades without actually working for it. Those very few students*

have been a big challenge to get through to and to limit their disruption to the course. Some students also seem to think it is ok to carry on a text-messaging conversation in class while I lecture.

While it seems like I have a lot of challenges, I do want to say that my department has been very helpful with my transition. I have a department assigned mentor to help out and she has provided great help during some of the student challenges I have faced. All the faculty are constantly checking in with me, not just my mentor and the Chair. We have shared offices and my office mate is also a Tar Heel alum and has been a big help with the transition from life at a large research institution to life at a small, state supported teaching university. All the faculty are available for advice and guidance and are doing everything they can to ensure that I succeed and am on the right track for tenure and promotion. From that angle, I am incredibly lucky.

The University is also very supportive of new faculty, with a yearlong orientation program and mentorship program. I have a mentor from another part of campus – we meet every three weeks or so to touch base. I go to the faculty development sessions when I can and have met some other new faculty from orientation to hang out with – we have found great support in each other when dealing with our daily lives on campus.

What is the biggest misconception about your career field?

That academics have cushy schedules. I didn't expect the job to be easy, but I didn't have a realistic view related to how much time many of the activities would take – I always seem to underestimate how much time it takes to grade 40 exams or homework assignments.

How did you find out about your current position?

I searched four main websites that focus either on public health positions or academic positions. For general academia, The Chronicle of Higher Education (www.chronicle.com) and Higher Ed Jobs (www.higheredjobs.com) are excellent. I also searched American Public Health Association's CareerMart (www.apha.org) and Public Health Education Connection (<http://cfusion.sph.emory.edu/PHEC/phec.cfm>). I was searching daily for the past year, beginning a bit before I was actually ready to start applying. This helped me gain a sense of what the opportunities would be like and what I would need for the application.

What strategies or resources did you find most helpful during your job search?

It's important to take advantage of any helpful opportunities. Prior to my post-doc, I used the Career Services at the School of Public Health to start my application materials and attend job search workshops. I also bought the Academic Job Search Handbook, which was helpful to start my application materials. Once I was a post-doc, I went to all the OPS workshops related to the academic job search. I worked with Dara on my application materials, meeting to revise my application materials and participate in a practice interview. Finally, a good friend of mine's father is a professor at a large university in the South and loves to mentor. Whenever he came up to see her, I would get advice from him; he also reviewed my materials and sent emails whenever I had questions about the process, including phone and on-site interviews.

Looking back on your time as a postdoc or your job search, what do you wish you would have done differently?

I don't feel that I would have changed much of my job search, as I took advantage of every opportunity I had during the year I was a post-doc. That said, I do wish I had been more prepared for my first phone interview - I got a lot of advice about how to conduct myself on the phone interview. However, phone interviews are very weird and I wish that more people had told me that. I definitely stunk up the first one! I was able to learn from it, but cost myself a potential on-site interview because I struggled through it and was not able to recover during the short time frame of the interview.

What career planning / job search advice do you have for current postdocs.

Take advantage of the opportunities we have at OPS! Go to the sessions and schedule personal meetings. Stay diligent about the job hunt - check sites daily. Go to conferences and try and network. Contact your old professors to see if they know anyone at schools you are applying too. Don't sweat the phone interviews - they are supposed to be weird. Ask anyone and everyone for help - reviewing materials, practice interviews. Find someone who either has recently gotten a job similar to what you are looking for or someone who has been on numerous search committees (or both!). The best piece of advice I received about the academic job process was this: The only people who really have a sense of where they stand are those that are not still in the hunt... and even they really don't. The process is long, and just because you haven't heard from a school after one interview right away, you just have to be patient. Its a long process of waiting, guessing and hoping.