

The FIVE LAWS of Academic Physics

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The Five Laws is a set of principles that promote career success for clinician educators in the academic environment. They were conceived 'tongue in cheek', but years of experience have demonstrated their practical worth and we are pleased to share them with you.

LAW 1: MUST BE PRESENT TO WIN

This is the overarching law. It concerns positioning oneself for academic success. For success, one must be in the right place, at the right time, with the right skills, and the right attitude, determination, perseverance and passion. Sometimes you also need luck.

The first law encompasses academic citizenship. Citizenship is about turning up, doing more than the minimum, volunteering, joining committees, taking on responsibilities and making oneself useful to the organization.

Being present to win is about being visible without being pushy. It's about social influence rather than self-serving behavior. It also concerns planning for success by ensuring that one has the right skill set. Academic skills can be obtained by taking a fellowship, attending classes, learning on line or from mentors, reading, attending conferences and/or through bitter experience!

Finally being present to win includes planning for your future career, knowing what you want to achieve in the way of skills and/or academic rank and position, then putting a plan in place to achieve your goals.

NOTES:

- I. One cannot be present to win only between the hours of 8am and 5 pm
- II. Sometimes, to be present to win, you need to move locations
- III. The need to be present to win increases as your career advances

QUESTION: What can I do in the next 6-12 months to be 'present to win' in my situation?

Answer:

LAW 2: EVERY INPUT MUST HAVE AT LEAST 2 OUTPUTS

The second law concerns efficiency of effort. Everyone is busy and works really hard. The secret of success is to make every piece of work count at least twice, and ideally several times. A sample cascade of outputs is shown in the white 'Scholarly Circle' handout.

The secret of success for Law 2 is planning. Before commencing a project, familiarize yourself with the literature on your subject. You may find ready-made resources that will

save you development time, and/or identify gaps in the literature that you can address in an educational research project.

Almost any educational intervention can be set up as a research project. One needs to identify a gap in the literature, compose a research question, design appropriate and innovative delivery methods and include a strong evaluation plan at the highest level possible. To aid you in this process, see the pink article on educational scholarship, the beige handout on assessment, the blue “Kirkpatrick Table’ and the grey template for educational research manuscripts.

Outputs from a single project may include: one or more grants, curricular materials that can be posted on FMDRL, oral presentations, posters and at least one publication. In addition, successful projects bring local and national recognition that may open doors to important committees and other career opportunities.

NOTE: Do NOT forget to obtain IRB approval if you plan to publish your project. IRB approval is not needed for presentations or postings on FMDRL.

QUESTION: What multiple outputs can I generate from a current or planned project?

Answer:

LAW 3: NO PAPER HAS A SINGLE AUTHOR

The third law concerns team work in all academic areas, not just in research and scholarly projects. No single person can demonstrate every skill needed to complete multiple circuits on the ‘Scholarly Circle’ with maximum efficiency and impact.

It’s important to assemble a strong team for any academic project. Skills needed include leadership, organization, literature appraisal, scientific writing, statistics, teaching ability and implementation / completion skills.

Some skills you are born with, some you can learn, and some you may never acquire. The important thing is that at least one person on the team contributes every skill.

NOTE: Not all team members need be on site at your home institution. Mentors are often external, and writing and statistical analysis can be easily be done remotely. National conferences are an important source of ideas as well as remote collaborators. (This is another example of Law 1: MUST BE PRESENT TO WIN)

QUESTION: What strengths do I bring to a project team, and which skills do I need from other members?

Strengths:

Needs:

LAW 4: INSTITUTIONS DON'T LOVE YOU BACK

At first sight Law 4 may appear cynical but it expresses an important lesson that can be painful to learn. While it is important to display citizenship and service and be present to win, one must balance personal needs with those of the institution.

Excessive unselfishness does not lead to promotion or advancement. A common example is a faculty member who works hard clinically and directs several courses or residency curricula, yet does not receive academic support and is too busy to produce scholarly product. Without product, that person will likely be unsuccessful when presented for promotion. In some institutions with an 'up or out' policy, that person may be required to leave their job. It's very important to know your institution's rules as regards promotion, and to ensure your track fits your job description and that you are set up for success, not failure. Your Chair or Division Director should advise you on your appropriate track for promotion. If they have not done so, make an appointment and ask!

Ideally, projects and work activities should be win-win and benefit both you and the institution. A senior external mentor can be a useful guide on which opportunities to seize and which to let pass.

Finally, in these uncertain economic times, it's important to have a back up plan in case your institution decides it no longer needs your services!

QUESTION: Are my personal needs aligned with those of my institution? If not, what is my plan to address the disparity?

Answer:

LAW 5: ONLY FIGHT IF YOU CARE

Law 5 concerns the appropriate channeling of personal resources. Academic success requires energy and passion, but applying these attributes excessively or indiscriminately can lead to disillusionment and burnout. Lessons from Law 5 include maintaining academic focus (versus plunging into every new opportunity), learning when to say 'no', and actively marshalling one's personal resources. Such marshalling should include maintaining a work-life balance and attending to personal health and fitness. Law 5 also involves avoiding making professional enemies wherever possible.

QUESTION: Am I effectively marshalling my personal resources? If not, how should I change my activities?

Answer:
