



## Effective, Current Literature Source for Equine Training Course

In the fall semester, Virginia Tech's Animal and Poultry Sciences Department offers the undergraduate course "Equine Behavior and Training." Each student is assigned a horse for the semester to train, using a variety of techniques presented during class discussions and demonstrations. Because of the exceptional popularity of the course, it is currently limited to graduating seniors in the department with enrollment of a few juniors if space permits. The course is taught in conjunction with another undergraduate course "Livestock Merchandising". Students enrolled in the two courses organize and conduct the Hokie Harvest Sale, a public auction of beef cattle and horses that occurs each October at Virginia Tech. Because proceeds from the sale of livestock are transferred directly to the beef cattle and equine undergraduate teaching programs, these activities are essential to survival of the programs while providing students with an exceptionally valuable, practical experience in preparing, training and marketing livestock.

"Equine Behavior and Training" is primarily a laboratory course, with considerable time spent at the barn where students interact with their horses for two-hour sessions, three days per week. Because the Departmental Undergraduate Teaching Committee requires academic rigor in all courses, there is also a lecture component to the training course (one hour per week). In past years pertinent journal articles were distributed each week as assigned readings. Students were quizzed on information in assigned articles at the beginning of each lecture session after which a group discussion was held to insure that relevant information was emphasized, understood and assimilated into horse handling activities at the barn.

The Horse is a monthly periodical containing current information on a variety of veterinary and husbandry issues, as well as timely articles on topics of interest to horse owners. The instructor of "Equine Behavior and Training" contacted the editorial staff of The Horse and requested that all students enrolled in the training course be provided with access to the magazine's web page and archives for fall semester 2006. This access was readily provided and students were able to access the website of the magazine with a class identification code and password.

The instructor assigned particular articles from current issues and archives of The Horse for each

lecture meeting. Thus, students could access articles on-line, print them if desired and prepare for each class meeting. Additionally, students had complete access to any articles available in the archives.

## Results

Members of the editorial staff at The Horse were exceptionally pleasant and helpful in setting up this system. The instructor was pleased that, in addition to reading the required articles, many students took the time and initiative to read additional articles and requested that those topics also be discussed in class. The additional reading generated interesting and informative interactions during discussion sessions. It appeared that the time limit associated with this situation (access to The Horse was available to students only during the three-month duration of the course) encouraged students to spend considerable time in perusing articles of interest to them. Several students subsequently purchased subscriptions to the magazine.

Use of The Horse articles and archives for "Equine Behavior and Training" discussions was an exceptionally informative and successful method of providing a considerable amount of information to students in an undergraduate equine course. Ease of access to the web site and willing cooperation of the editorial staff of The Horse enhanced the experience.

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## Career Check-up, Rather than Check-out

Do you find yourself going to work everyday and you just know you (personally) are hitting on only three-cylinders, instead of all eight? Alternatively, do you feel that you are simply "spinning your wheels" over the recent course of your academic career? Perhaps, you feel deflated--like a flat tire, with no air pump in sight. If any of these feelings persists, perhaps you need a career check-up. A career check-up may be different for each person, but likely is completed on a periodic basis--just like an oil change for your car. However, annual reviews by your department chairperson do not really count, as the career check-up needs to be very personal, and should not simply be based on "bean counting." For some

## Teaching Tips

individuals, this self-assessment might be done once every year, every five years, and for others it may take longer.

### What to look for

A career check-up is a difficult concept for academicians to consider. While your position allows one to be self-motivated and directed, some main road signs are clear indications that something may be wrong with you. You might not even sense that something is wrong, especially if you have been doing some of these things for a long period of time. However, the following represent a few of the main items that you might easily recognize.

Is your work stale? Perhaps one of the most telling symptoms of the need for a career check-up is that your academic work becomes stale. No longer do you spend hours working on class notes, or on research problems. Instead, you may find other distractions to occupy your time. Administrative opportunities are frequently accepted, and you may find yourself as one of the main persons always on committees, or serving as your district's representative to the faculty senate. Further, life may become more social, and you may be willing to spend countless hours walking up and down the hallways to converse with others. Productivity towards your main goal of teaching or research will likely fall, or become dull, and you might be capable of finding an inordinate amount of excuses as to why that might occur.

Do you possess apathy in what you do or say? Remember when you were a new assistant professor and everything that you said was taken by the senior faculty as being aggressive and pompous? What happened to that person? Now, you may appear to be one of the "other" group. When you are in need of a career check-up, you may find yourself becoming more casual, less aggressive, perhaps even protective of your academic life. You may even hide from others (shutting your office door, not participating in faculty meetings, or leaving work early) in an attempt to maintain your "posture." One sure sign of career apathy is if you ever find yourself "living on your accomplishments," without a plan for making progress in the future. For example, have you ever said "I have published my 100 papers, now I can retire!" If so--wake-up!

Are you jealous of others? Do you think that others are getting ahead of you in the recognition area? Are salary adjustments not coming in as you thought they might at this stage of your career? Are you watchful of the praise or recognition that others might be receiving? Jealousy might be manifested in a number of other ways. For example, do you find yourself talking over someone in a faculty meeting--even though what you are saying does not have anything to do with the topic at hand? In addition,

have you ever found yourself discussing someone with the department chairman in a derogatory manner--even if their academic existence has nothing whatsoever to do with you or your laboratory? If so, you might be jealous of the other individual, which will distract you from your main tasks--teaching and research. Collectively, jealousy seems to be a major causative agent in career problems. One that recognizes this quickly has a greater chance of getting back on the right career pathway. Jealousy should always be considered in a career check-up.

Do you find yourself ensconced in the turmoil of self-pity? Self-pity seems to be a difficult characteristic to get a good grip on. A little bit likely is healthy, as it keeps one aggressive and focused on positive goals. However, becoming ensnarled in self-pity is easy to do when a grant is not funded, or a manuscript is rejected--especially at the mid-career level. Recognizing that you might spend time lamenting on "what could have been," instead of directly attacking the issue at hand is a good indicator that you need a career check-up.

Are you continuously tired? Being tired after a day's work in academia is normal. How many times have you gone home after a day of grant writing feeling like a wet dish-rag? However, being tired "all of the time" is not normal. While there may be medical issues at play, in which you may need to consult a physician, if you remain tired after receiving a clean bill-of-health the tiredness that you feel could be due to the (self-imposed?) stress of your academic position catching-up with you. A career check-up is definitely needed.

Are you the "cranky one?" I always hate to interact with cranky people! Are you one? Have you been told that you were hard to get along with others? Does every little thing bother you to the point that you feel compelled to "let someone know about it?" How about that annual review--missing a few merit points due to "a problem with collegiality?" Being chronically cranky comes with all of the previous problems.

### Self-evaluation

Even harder than the recognition that something may be wrong in your day-to-day academic life that may be "pulling your career down" is the mechanism with which to make changes. The following represent a few ways that you might consider in order to get back on the career path:

Take a few days off. Get away from the environment to which you sense has problems. While away, do not distract yourself with work. Why might you think that poor work at home is any better than poor work (at work)? Instead, you would be better served if you simply "turned-off" the work mode and "turned-on" the personal mode.... and take care of yourself. Look after number one for a day or two. You do have to live

with yourself for the rest of your life. Why not celebrate where/who you are? For a day or two, simply relax, as that is why there is such a thing called annual leave.

Assess what is important in your life. I always tell students that they must take care of themselves first, before they can focus on class work. Why? If students have personal, financial or (other) problems, they simply cannot focus on their course work. If they can "lay to rest" these distractions, they will be in a much better position to tackle their academics. The same seems to be important when one is performing a career check-up. What is important to you? Make lists. Assess, assess, and assess-then assess some more. Determine what your priorities, at this stage of your career might be. You will likely find out that you are not the same individual that you were twenty to thirty years ago, in terms of your career goals.

Determine if a change of environment or job type is in the cards. It is not uncommon for a productive scientist or teacher to slow down, as their career gets longer. It is also not uncommon, however, for the mid-to-late-career academic to "check-out." Have you seen someone in your department maintain an office, but get absolutely nothing done, for (say) ten years or so? A change in job type might have been the best thing in the world for these types of individuals. Are you one of them? If so, what type of a job would you consider doing at this point? I have always thought that your work should be like a hobby. If you considered it so, you would never get tired of it. Is there something that you would rather do in the academic environment, in which there were opportunities to do so?

### **Implementation plan**

Someone can easily point fingers and tell you what is wrong with you. Everyone does it, but everyone hates when it happens to them. The following represents an assessment process that I did (on myself) a few years ago. It does not represent something that Dr. Phil, or anyone else that may possess therapeutic credentials, might suggest. Rather, as an academic that had somewhat of a career check-up, here are my suggestions:

**Focus on your identity.** You are only you, and no one else. You have strengths and weaknesses that are very personal. What might you offer in terms of strengths for the remainder of your career that will be progressive and add to a department or unit? Identify these and build on them as time passes.

**Establish a solid foundation/plan.** After considering what you have to offer, you next need to determine how you can conduct "your business." Likely, you may determine that you need to change jobs, or refocus your efforts towards teaching (only) or research (only). If this is your career goal (at this time), it focuses on your strengths, and it will serve you to

maintain enthusiasm (hobby?) "go for it." At this time you might need to discuss your "status" with your department chairman to determine if a change in academic appointment is needed--or allowed. Communication with others at this time does not place pressure on yourself to "perform." Rather, it should allow you a release of pressure, as you have rededicated yourself to conduct of quality time at work. Who (what chairperson) in their right mind would ever disallow you that opportunity--especially if the alternative is for you to "check-out?"

**Build on small successes.** When I performed the mid-career check-up on myself a few years ago, one of the difficulties I faced was how to make scientific advancement in a research area that had few researchers in it. I would get grant reviews that informed me that no one could perform the experiments that I had designed. Consequently, at that time there were little funds for conduct of the research. After the career check-up, I did not abandon my plans for the research. Instead, I cut the experiments into smaller and smaller experiments until they did work. Tedious, yes. Successful, yes. The same can be suggested about other academic endeavors. Once you have established a plan for your remaining career, take "baby steps" towards whatever goal that you have chosen. As time passes, and successes build--you will change. Your confidence, attitude towards others, and outlook on life (in general) will brighten.

**Involve others as role models.** No matter whom you might decide "has a perfect academic career" there is always something in their life that is hidden, a problem, or that they must "deal with." No one is perfect. However, choose the best of role models. Perhaps, you like how one faculty communicates with others orally, and how another faculty member writes. You can always assimilate their best traits for your own use. Also, get these people involved in your research, writings, and teaching. Being in proximity to winners works!

**Determine a personal reward system.** Is it promotion to full professor that you might have as a roadblock? Perhaps you will never achieve this reward. Promotions are dependent on numerous items. It may be that in the department to which you reside, that you never are promoted at this stage of your career. Can you live with that? If so, what other rewards might you implement as your personal "pat on the back" for resolving your career dilemma and getting yourself "back on track?" Items like taking a day off every time you submit a solid grant proposal or manuscript, taking a walk around campus whenever you have gotten word of something being accepted, or having a barbeque for each of your graduating graduate students are all forms of personal rewards that one might implement. Not only do these types of rewards allow you some time to "catch your breath,"

## Teaching Tips

they also take care of your personal need for a “pat on the back.” In this case you are taking charge of the patting. It is remarkable that one might need to do these types of things for themselves, but for mid- to late-career academics whom else is interested?

Develop a reassessment time interval, but do not reassess too early. Your career check-up might need to be revisited on some sort of a regular basis, especially if circumstances dramatically change. Your health status, changes in your academic administration, and personnel changes are some of the potential reasons why you might consider performing another career check-up. However, if you have performed one recently, and it is working well—do not alter it. Continue to strive for the goal that you have set for yourself. Allow yourself to mature in your new hobby, during the remainder of your career.

## Check-up vs check out

It is up to you. Do you want to stay mired in a non-productive situation, or do you want to take a proactive approach in altering your academic existence? How do you want to “go out?” That is, when you retire do you want to know (who cares what others think?) that you were sufficiently flexible and altered your approach to your career during its entire course in order to contribute positively to your academic career? If not, perhaps checking out is OK with you. For all of the others, a career check-up may be just what you need. What do you have to lose? Nothing. Instead, you have the remainder of your career “to gain.”

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