Career Profile of Professor at an Undergraduate College, Jen Uno, PhD

What is your current title and how long have you worked in your current job?
I am currently a tenure track assistant professor in the Department of Biology at Elon University. I began working at Elon in August so I have about 6 months of sage old advice to give!

Where did you get your PhD and what discipline was it in?
I earned my PhD from the University of Arizona in Tucson, Az. I received my degree in Physiology with a biochemistry minor. I often tell people that I am a physiologist by training and that my organ of study is the gut and my disease of interest is inflammatory bowel diseases (IBD).

Did you do a postdoc? Where?
I did do a postdoc! I was a SPIRE fellow here at UNC. I encourage all students to do as postdoc even if they are not going into academics. There are so many different postdocs available (from industry to academics) it not only teaches you to be an independent scientist but it gives you time to develop contacts and establish a network. If you know what you want to do (ie be a Professor at a teaching University) then I would be sure to pick a postdoc that caters to those goals, think about the type of research that you want to do and what experiences you need in order to be competitive when you do go on the job market. If there is not a specific program you are interested in, that’s fine - just be sure to have a mentor that knows, understands and is supportive of your ultimate goals and will let you create the experiences you want to have as a postdoctoral fellow. If you don’t know exactly what you want to do, then a postdoctoral fellowship can allow you to explore your options and see where you want to end up.

What are your main daily responsibilities?
At a primary undergraduate institute like Elon University, they typically value your time in the classroom as much or more than in the lab. That said, on a typical day I spend most of my time either in the classroom or preparing for lectures in the classroom. I also have a lot of student contact time outside of lecture, whether it is advising students or clarifying topics from lecture. At Elon, they emphasize the idea of have faculty that are “teacher-scholars” meaning that I do still have an active research lab in addition to my teaching responsibilities. So I do still spend a part of my day working on getting my research lab up and running and keeping current with literature.

What are the keys to success in your career field?
Hmmm... ask me again post-tenure?

In general, for me it has been all about taking advantage of opportunities that arise and being willing to open my self up to new experiences, even if they are out of my comfort zone.
In the classroom- be prepared and let you students know that you care about them. You will be amazed how hard they are willing to work if they know that you truly want them to succeed.

In the lab- don’t give up and know that good data comes in waves. If you have been in grad school for a while then you probably already know this. Science filled with ridiculous ups and downs so when you are getting good data, ride the wave, run as many damn experiments as possible and bask in the glow of collecting good, useable data. Conversely, when things are down read up on the latest techniques, go to talks, stay motivated and remember that the up swing is bound to come soon.

Professionally- I know you hear this all the time- but networking is so important. Establishing connections as a graduate student and postdoc will serve you well as you continue your career. It can be helpful when you enter the job market and as a new professor it will get you started. If you do end up at a small university, then having contacts will keep you in touch with “big wigs” in your field.

What were the most important factors in choosing your career path?
There are a couple of things that really influenced my career path:

My past mentors in and outside of the classroom. I was extremely lucky to have dynamic professors that really fostered my love of science. They were so engaging in the classroom and I wanted to be just like them. I also had some truly awesome research mentors that made helped my to develop my technical skills and really taught me about the scientific process- from the lab and beyond.
Lifestyle. I think it is a common misconception that professors at liberal arts colleges work less than those at a bigger more research-intensive university. I can tell you that I worked just as hard (if not harder) my first semester at Elon as I did during my postdoc at UNC. I do however think the environment is much different as is the emphasis. I am no longer stressed about funding and grant writing, it is more about lecture preps and grading. While research will become a more important part of my work at Elon with time, it will be at a much slower pace that UNC. Elon is also very supportive of their faculty and staff, tenure is mine to earn and I am not competing for a position, they want me to succeed as much as I do. My department has a several young faculty members (male and female) that have young children and as a female professor this is something that is important to me. As much as I love my job, I also cherish my life outside of academics; working at a smaller school (especially at Elon) allows me to enjoy both worlds equally.

What 1 or 2 pieces of advice do you have for people who want to land a job like yours?
Like I mentioned above, I really do think the postdocs are a valuable experience- jus be sure to make your experiences count and remember time will go by much faster than you can imagine!
Whatever you decide to do, you will undoubtedly be more successful if you enjoy what you are doing. I always loved being in the classroom. As a graduate student I was required to TA for a semester and I loved it, I sought out more teaching opportunities and found that I was just as happy in the classroom as I was at the bench. On the other hand I also really liked doing more translational research (both my graduate mentor and postdoctoral mentor are MD’s) and really enjoyed the scientific process. What I realized toward the end of my postdoctoral fellowship was that I did not have the same research aspirations as most of my colleagues. While I took pride in my work, I would just assume publish in the American Journal of Physiology rather than Science or Nature. I realize that I can have a bigger impact in the classroom than I ever will at the bench. In the end it was realizing that I did not have to pursue an RO1 research career just because I was good at it, but that I could choose to do what I really love doing, teaching both in the classroom and at the bench.

Links for more information on this career path:

Big Thinking At Small Universities
http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2010_09_10/science.opms.r1000094

Teaching Postdocs: An Alternative Approach to an Academic Career
http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2001_10_05/noDOI.15973244409339441580

Careers in Science Teaching
http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/1999_05_07/noDOI.14225063014956177110