"Find a Mentor, Someone Who Loves to Teach and Who Is Good at It"

Kelly J. Arbeau

Kelly J. Arbeau

Abstract In the interview with Kelly Arbeau, we discuss how she has adapted to adversities—including PhD supervisor leaving and university closing. Despite these challenges, Kelly found fulfilling job roles and was able to secure a tenured academic position. In this process, Kelly also describes how she revised her strategy for how she fits within her department and university. Consider how much you enjoy teaching and what other considerations may relate to where you would want a position, such as location, but also faith and other potential values of the university. Deciding your own priorities and expectations related to collaboration, teaching, and research can help you make sure you stay on track with all of the roles that need to be balanced. There are many great resources out there, from workshops to books; use what you can to prepare yourself for the job market.

Contents

K. J. Arbeau (✉)
Department of Psychology, Trinity Western University, Langley, BC, Canada
e-mail: kelly.arbeau@twu.ca

C. R. Madan (ed.), *Academia and the World Beyond*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-82606-2_18

Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?

Kelly: I am a tenured assistant professor at the Department of Psychology at Trinity Western University. I recently ticked the last box on all the things needed to apply for promotion to associate professor, 1 year ahead of my personal goal. Faculty at TWU are required to apply for tenure at the 5-year mark, but we have the flexibility to largely set our own goals with respect to promotion.

My interests include integrating quantitative (especially multilevel modeling) and qualitative methods in interdisciplinary health research, as well as the phenomenology of involuntary separation. My third and more surprising (to me) area of research interest is motivation for playing video games. Several years ago, a former student approached me wanting to do something about gaming and game players, and this "fun side project" was born. I think there can be real value in pursuing side interests in research. Over time, the gaming project has grown: two good friends who are graduate students at other universities have joined the team as collaborators, two undergraduate students have received funding to support their own work on the project, and recently two faculty colleagues and I received some funding of our own. (As an aside, am I a gamer? I am now!) I did pick up a replacement "fun side project" too, research relating to creativity and the arts. We staged an art exhibition last year that communicated the results of a small research study on creativity and religious faith. It was the experience of a lifetime. I can't draw worth beans, so I composed verbatim poetry to illustrate each of the study themes. The team lead, an art and design professor, recently pivoted his focus and invited me to join himself and a biologist on a project aimed at developing a set of creative practices for scientific research and knowledge mobilization. A few days ago, we learned that we have been awarded a federal grant to support this project. Our "test case" focuses on new management methods for invasive knotweed in British Columbia. Research is 30% of my contract.

I also teach six undergraduate courses/year (60% of my contract), including the junior and senior research methods courses, social psychology, cognition, and psychology of gender, plus occasional offerings of other courses, such as health psychology and intro psych. Because we are a small department, I am sometimes asked

to teach outside of my area of expertise. When that happens (e.g., psychology of gender), I commit to reading wide and deep, and to consulting with experts, to make sure that the course is delivered to a high standard. I still strongly prefer to have at least some graduate-level training in any course that I teach, however.

In support of the service component of my contract (10%), I act as Tri-Council (Canadian federal funding agencies) ethics expert on the human research ethics committee and sit on the Undergraduate Academic Council, which reviews program and course changes. I also supervise undergraduate honors research and co-chair the psychology research participation program, which I was asked to co-develop and introduce in my first year at TWU.

What was the focus of your PhD?

I defended for a PhD in health psychology from the Department of Psychology at the University of Alberta in 2007. Those familiar with the University of Alberta will note that the department does not offer a PhD in health psychology. I was initially slated to work with a new hire who held strong health research interests. She moved her lab to another university about 6 weeks before my move to Alberta. I'd already confirmed my spot, secured a room in the most beautiful residence on campus, Pembina Hall, purchased a plane ticket, and (the most important factor) the university's offer of full funding was still available, so off I went, sans supervisor with health interests. The department and my replacement supervisors (one in psychology, one in public health) generously facilitated my efforts to patch together a *very custom*, *very multidisciplinary* PhD program.

As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?

I was career planning long before I realized that the PhD program was itself part of my career. Within a year or so of entering the program, I started working toward a certificate in undergraduate teaching. It was actually my mom who recommended it; I had little interest at the time in doing too much beyond the already quite rigorous program requirements. I taught my first course shortly after passing my candidacy exam in 2005, which was the department's requirement for course instructors. It was a spring (May–June) section of introductory psychology, and at age 25, I am pretty certain that I was the youngest person in the room. I was so intimidated by the whole situation that I wore a suit to every class. My hands shook a lot, my voice quavered, but the students were so kind and so patient, and they feigned surprise at the end of the semester when I said it was my first time teaching. I even made the teaching honor roll!

As I was entering the latter stage of my PhD program, I was thinking about settling into a position at a small, undergraduate-focused university and having a cozy little straightforward career path from assistant professor on up. I was deeply concerned about the research productivity part of the contract, but more or less confident that I could work something out. I started doing phone interviews and campus visits at this point.

And as I was finishing my PhD, I was in the latter stages of interviewing for my first faculty position, which I was offered shortly after my December 2007 defense.

Little did I know that "enrollment is booming" was one of those stories that people tell themselves and their job candidates when they want to pretend they're not actually on a sinking ship: I acquired a condo and a mortgage in July; my contract began in August; and by November or early December, the university had announced that it would close permanently.

What did you do then?!

I took a job as a researcher in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Alberta. Then, 10 months later?

The research group closed.

Right about that time (May 2010), I realized how useful it is to live in a city that is packed with colleges and universities. Another local university gave me a 1-year full-time sessional teaching contract (extended to 2 years), complete with prescription drug coverage, which was very important to me because also in May 2010 I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease. The unplanned second year of my contract covered a sick leave for a faculty member. The pieces clicked together: people with continuing contracts have more options. By then, my condition had gotten quite bad, and it was interfering with my ability to be an effective university teacher.

So I laid out all my options, made several lists and even more phone calls, and decided to leave academia. I convinced the department where I did my PhD to hire me in a continuing, nonacademic role, which I did efficiently and I did well. I'm proud of the work that I did in the role, and I was incredibly grateful to the department for the steady employment and the excellent health insurance. Moreover, the flexibility the department gave me enabled me to more effectively manage my health conditionsymptoms effectively. I'd thought my exit from academia was permanent, too, until my friend Dan convinced me to—well, to move to Vancouver, actually. The idea to return to academia as part of that move was mostly mine. I think. My health was better and no longer driving the narrative, I was back to supervising undergraduate research and teaching classes, and I missed being a professor. I really missed it.

How have your career plans changed as you've continued on to your current position?

For the first 4 years of my current position, my career plan centered on stability and brevity. I aimed to put myself in as strong a position as possible to be awarded tenure, and I designed a "cut-and-run" strategy geared toward saving enough to either retire or shift to half-time work around age 50. But then, in my first year of eligibility, research methods students nominated me for one of the university's two annual teaching awards—and now that framed award recognizing innovative teaching has pride of place on my office wall. A year or so later, I had a particularly productive year, research-wise. Grant-funded undergraduate researchers made substantial contributions to that work. And then, a few weeks after being awarded tenure, one more thing happened: my dean shared that he values the contributions I make to the department, noting, "I don't see you as a(nother) yellow pencil. I see you as something else." These three experiences, taken together, led to a revised strategy. Rather than shuffling toward early retirement, I am thinking that I would like to aim to be in a position to apply for promotion to full professor as soon as I meet the length-of-service requirement. I would also like to explore whether there might be something else, in addition to my regular classroom teaching and research supervision, that I can uniquely offer my program, or the university. And rather than retiring at age 50, maybe that's when I might like to find out what it's like to spend the afternoon reading papers in a coffee shop.

If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a similar position as you have now, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?

Find a mentor, someone who loves to teach and who is good at it. My teaching mentor was Connie Varnhagen, a 3M award-winning teacher of psychology. Even though most of what she taught me about showing respect for students, finding noncoercive ways to encourage participation, and plain having fun in the classroom went completely over my head at the time, over time those lessons have settled in and become a core part of my own teaching practice.

Also find out whether you like to teach, how often, and whether you are willing to teach to department need. The particular department need when I was hired was methods, so I offer at least three sections of junior and advanced level methods courses every year. Luckily, teaching methods has turned out to be one of the most satisfying aspects of my job. I really enjoy the other courses that I teach, too. But in 5 years, I have only taught health psychology, my area of specialization, once. The reviews were very positive, but when it's a choice between offering a core course (say, social psychology) and a specialty course (health psychology), the core course has to win out.

Another factor to consider to help you decide if a position like mine is a good fit is to find out whether there are options for faculty to adjust their teaching and research commitments; at my university, for example, the teaching load ranges from four courses to eight courses.

Next, ask yourself whether you can do research on a shoestring budget. Make a list of the minimum resources that you would need the university to provide (e.g., library resources, lab space, a budget for equipment), and think creatively about what you might study if the university you end up at cannot offer those resources. At my institution, there is a strong expectation of at least a moderate level of productivity, and this is true of many (though not all) teaching-intensive institutions. Research matters for annual evaluation, for promotion, for tenure decisions, and to maintain your reputation among your peers on campus and in the broader academic community. It could be in some cases that you can do minimal research and keep your job, but it will delay your own career progress and might close you off from certain opportunities. A position at a teaching-focused university may not be a good fit if you prefer to spend most of your time doing research then, but it also might not be a good fit if you have little interest in maintaining an active program of research, or little interest in involving undergraduate students in your work. Mentorship and exposure to experiential learning opportunities is a key feature of teaching-focused universities.

Another feature of my position is that it is located at a religious (Christian) university. Some religious universities will want you to acknowledge that you respect their faith tradition. Others will want you to share that tradition, and still others will want you to endorse very particular denomination-specific beliefs. Find out which it is before you prepare your application package.

More broadly, watch and listen for clues at the interview that the institution and the department will be a good fit. Ask if you can sit down with a prospective colleague, and listen—really listen—to what they say to you and how they respond to your questions. How do the faculty interact with each other and with administrators? Who says what outside of the formal interview periods, and how do others respond? Once, at a 2-day campus visit, I knew before sitting down to breakfast on the first day that I would not accept the position if it was offered to me.

Are there some aspects of running a research lab with undergraduate volunteers that someone currently finishing a PhD—in a lab with all of the related infrastructure—might need to consider? Any advice for them?

Someone running a lab with all undergraduate volunteers likely will not have much in the way of infrastructure. I found out recently that students in our program refer to the shared psychology lab space as a closet. It has a countertop desk, two desktop computers, three old chairs, two small filing cabinets, a tripod that I donated, and

little else. Three faculty members share the space. This situation isn't too unusual for a primarily undergraduate university. But there are ways to overcome the limitations! Project management happens on Evernote, materials are posted to cloud storage, a small collection of "how to be a researcher" books live on a shelf in my office, and papers are downloaded to Zotero. We collect most data online.

Now, advice. A lab manual will help you and your volunteers in so many ways. Write a sentence or two articulating the lab's purpose. A statement of purpose can give context to, for example, expectations regarding how each lab member should treat colleagues and participants. If you can, illustrate the connections between your lab's statement of purpose and how you do research. For example, in my lab, any project pertaining to disability or involving marginalized groups must honor the "nothing about us without us" principle that comes directly from disability advocates. Authorship guidelines state the conditions under which volunteers will be included as authors, or thanked in the acknowledgments section, on published papers or in conference presentations. Include a passwords and procedures section to keep key information together in one place and easy to locate. Also state, as clearly as you can, what you can offer volunteers. Will you engage in collaborative decision-making? Will you write reference letters? Do you buy coffee? Are lab members given priority for honors thesis supervision? The appendices to our lab manual include sample research materials, including consent and debriefing forms, as well as common demographics (plus lab policies regarding when to collect particular types of demographic information and how to frame each question).

The other key piece of advice that I can offer is to actively pursue strategies that will accomplish the joint goals of (1) helping your undergraduate volunteers grow their skills and (2) saving you time. Some examples:

- Encourage collaboration on each other's projects. Each project will be better for drawing on the unique knowledge, skills, and experiences that each lab member has to offer. Working collaboratively also normalizes sending work to each other for feedback. Too many graduate students express insecurity about sharing ideas or showing their writing to others, but these are key aspects of scholarship. Make it supportive, keep it matter of fact—and if someone makes a substantial contribution to a colleague's project, consider formally adding them to the project team. This collaborative approach is how my current most senior lab member wound up with two papers in print before graduation.
- Offer volunteers opportunities for leadership and increasing independence over the course of their time with the lab.
- Do everything you can to help turn your volunteers into paid staff. Many students have scant time to do volunteer work when there are bills to pay. Our lab's recent increase in productivity is directly connected to the summer research assistantship program recently introduced at my university. And both lab members who won the grant last summer have landed funded positions in terrific graduate programs.
- Try to get papers out the door before your co-authors graduate. Life will get even busier following graduation, other priorities will claim their time, and they can

wind up being hard to reach. If you plan to publish *with or without* the involvement of your lab members following graduation, make that clear too, and address whether changes in their level of involvement might affect their author status.

If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?

Sign up for any and all teaching workshops, certificates, and mentorship opportunities offered by your university. Then, gain some teaching experience at your university or at a local college.

Start developing a teaching philosophy. What would you like students to take away from each course? How will you design your courses to reflect those goals? Who are you and who do you want to be as a university teacher?

Build collaborations with others. Can you share resources? For example, my friend at a major research university used her research pool access to collect the data for our most recent study, and in return, I am using my professional development funds to cover most of the other costs associated with the project.

What do you like most about your work?

At this point in my career, what I like most is feeling deeply satisfied with the positive, productive relationships I have built with students, colleagues, and others. I also greatly value the independence and flexibility of my position, feeling like I have a voice at the university, and being granted the time and space needed to set and meet long-range goals. I have a real sense of control over my own career. It's an empowering experience.

What do you like least about your work?

The primary challenge is the difficulty involved in balancing the huge number of tasks that need time and attention each week: class meetings, lecture prep, email, marking, office hours, connecting with colleagues, data collection, writing manuscripts, revising manuscripts, undergraduate thesis supervision, student advising, committee meetings, meeting with collaborators, paperwork, department planning, grant applications, writing reference letters, and faculty meetings. My dream job is exactly the job that I have now, just 20% less of it. I rely on Evernote and a white board—and, let's be honest, my TAs and RAs—to help me keep track of everything that's going on, but I have not solved one recurrent problem: failing to leave myself

enough time each week to work on the sorts of tasks that require a few hours of uninterrupted thought. Moreover, although I rarely miss deadlines or forget to attend meetings, I constantly have this sense that I am on the edge of failing to do something important. I have dreams about forgetting to go to class or showing up for class with nothing prepared. The shift to working from home and teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic has only increased that sense of not being able to stay on top of important tasks, so I have arranged to have 20-minute daily meetings with a personal assistant. They keep track of deadlines small and large and help me double-check that I have dotted my i's and jotted my t's.

A second challenge is not having a clear sense of what is "enough" or what is "good." Is one paper in a year ok? Are four papers in a year good, average, or satisfactory? Should I present at more conferences, attend more campus events, take on more undergraduate research mentees, and apply for more grants? What happens when the answer to each of those questions is yes?

Based on your journey, what is some advice or suggestions you would want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?

Start working with your campus career center to plan for what's next. Use their resources and other resources to help you prepare for the academic job market, for example, Inger Mewburn's *The Thesis Whisperer* and Karen Kelsky's *The Professor Is In*. Work with someone who has a strong knowledge of what makes for a solid letter of intent, teaching statement and portfolio, and other application materials. Ask that person to help you anticipate interview questions and prepare responses to each of those questions, including illegal questions (they are uncomfortable and they happen) and awkward moments (ditto). If you might be asked to give a research talk or to teach a class, arrange for knowledgeable others to give you feedback on content and, especially, delivery. You cannot over-prepare for an academic job interview, but you *can* be ready to handle, with aplomb, anything that is thrown at you.

Tailor each letter of intent to the specific institution and also to the type(s) of institution that you want to work at. An outstanding candidate whose letter reads as though they are much more interested in full-time research than in prioritizing their teaching may not be shortlisted for an opportunity at a teaching-focused, primarily undergraduate university, for example. If you are applying for a position at a community college, or a liberal arts university, or a polytechnic, make it plain that you understand and share the mission of that type of institution. I tell my students who apply to graduate school to show rather than say and to be specific rather than general, and the same advice applies here. Show the hiring committee that you want to be their colleague and that you are invested in building your career at their institution.

In your letter of intent, articulate what sets you apart from other job candidates. Be motivated, be precise, and use examples as evidence. For example, if your goal

is for students to translate knowledge of the course content into action, explain why this goal matters, and then tell the committee exactly how you will meet that goal each semester. In the letter of intent for my current job, I described student posters on display at nonprofit organizations, as well as a public talk and colorful brochure created by students for family and visitors at a local long-term care facility.

Don't buy into the myth that your value is tied up in being a scholar.

As much as possible, always aim to have a plan B. Others have suggested that my, ahem, extreme dedication to having a backup plan at all times stems from my working class background. I'm not sure, but I do know that it does more than help me sleep at night: it also helps me quickly rebound after a career setback. My backup plan when I applied to graduate school in psychology was library school. My backup plan for a career in academia was to pursue a second PhD, in epidemiology. My backup plan at any given time for an unexpected job loss is a different type of academic *or* nonacademic role at a university. I have lost two academic jobs due to closures, but I have never been without a contract for full-time work.

Everyone reading this book recognizes the current state of the academic job market. It can take years to land a tenure track position. If you do get on the tenure track, your new department, faculty, or university might not be a good fit. University and research group closures are uncommon but not unheard of. It could be that you might decide to consider alt-ac (alternative academic) and nonacademic options, not only as a stop-gap measure but as another option for a rewarding, fulfilling career. You will find myriad ways—big and small, obvious and creative—to bring your skills to bear in whatever career path(s) you choose. I enjoyed my nonacademic position a great deal, and I would do it again.

You may also decide to consider pursuing short-term contracts to help you through leaner times: writing textbook ancillaries and sessional teaching, for example. Sessional teaching is important work (I still do it, and I love it). It can be deeply rewarding, and it can also help you get, or keep, a foot in the door at an institution. However, relying on sessional teaching can be stressful, even grinding, in the long term: teaching four classes at four different institutions is exhausting, the pay is usually low, benefits are often nonexistent, and courses can be cancelled at the last minute. In some cases, a department's current sessional instructors are no more likely than are other applicants to be shortlisted for a job opening.

For as long as you remain active on the academic job market, though, do whatever you can to stay involved in research at some level. Recently, I asked a colleague why the hiring committee had selected me over other candidates back in 2015, given that I had been working in a support staff position. They replied that the clincher was my continued involvement in research and research mentorship.

Decide what matters most to you: where you live, lifestyle, degree of independence in your work, using your PhD training, job role, long-term goals. Center those values in your career-related decisions. It's ok (awesome, really) to choose being a good family member over a job offer, for example—but find out whether it might be possible to have it all.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?

I have a tip: Find out which courses nobody wants to teach, and convince yourself that *you* do. If you can, teach those courses once or twice before you go on the job market. Use that teaching experience as evidence of your commitment to the course that you are fairly certain the second most recent hire can't wait to hand off to you.

Thanks so much for sharing your experiences with us, Kelly. It is much appreciated!