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Being a Chancellor's Fellow

That's a fancy way of saying that I am a junior academic with a permanent research and teaching position, approximately equivalent to a lectureship.

A typical week

Every day is different. The majority of my time is taken up with research, and that's really an umbrella term that covers things like running experiments, doing fieldwork, and analysing data (actually DOING the research) but also things like grant writing to support the research, preparing talks for conferences, writing manuscripts, and organising future research projects. I teach on several undergraduate courses and also advise four PhD students and a Master's student, all of whom are working on their own projects that are integrated into my broader research programme. I am involved in some University committees and have various admin responsibilities, although not as much as my more senior colleagues. I also do other things, like serve on the editorial board of journals, sit on professional committees outside the University, and take part in a whole lot of scientific outreach and communication. At least once a week I'm doing a public talk, or recording a television or radio interview, speaking with a journalist, visiting a local school, or working on popular science

My career journey

My career path was in many ways very traditional (I climbed the normal academic ladder by getting various degrees) but in other ways untraditional, because I started doing research very soon after I started my undergraduate course. I am from the USA and did an undergraduate degree in Geophysical Sciences at the University of Chicago (2002-2006), which was an hour and a half drive from where I grew up in the middle of a bunch of corn and soybean fields. I was very fortunate to be able to work closely with a distinguished palaeontologist when I was in Chicago, Paul Sereno. He involved me in several fieldwork projects and gave me a lot of fossils to describe, so I was able to start doing research and writing papers as an undergrad. Towards the end of my time in Chicago I applied for a Marshall Scholarship to do graduate work in the UK and was shocked when it actually worked out. So I went to Bristol for a couple of years to do a Master's degree in palaeobiology (2006-2008). Then it was time to do a PhD, so I hopped back to the US and entered a great programme at Columbia University in New York that is jointly run by the American Museum of Natural History (2008-2012). In both Bristol and New York I also had excellent research advisors, so I kept getting more and more opportunities to travel, do fieldwork, and work on amazing fossils. I had a nice portfolio of publications when I finished my PhD so I desperately wanted to try to leverage that into a permanent job. It's not the most traditional route, because normally you would do a few postdocs. But I had recently gotten married and my wife and I didn't want to keep moving around. It just so happened that the University of Edinburgh advertised a round of Chancellor's Fellowships about six months before I finished my PhD, and they were in any possible area of study. So I applied on a whim, got an interview, almost missed the interview when the airline that shall not be named had a seven hour delay on their one New York-Edinburgh flight, but I got there in the end and things went well, and I found myself with a job offer in one of the world's best earth sciences departments, and here I am.



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What has helped me progress

My education and my research advisors. I was always a proactive student, always asking annoying questions and trying to study different types of fossils. But no scientist works alone, and even unbridled passion isn't enough. You need good support. I think I chose three great places to study and in each place was able to forge a close bond with my supervisors, and that opened up the world of research possibilities.

Supportive people

My PhD supervisor, Mark Norell, is an indescribable character. He is one of the world's most respected paleontologists, the curator of the globally-famous American Museum of Natural History dinosaur collections. He has research networks across the world, is a beast in the field, and has published some of the most provocative papers on dinosaurs over the past few decades. He's also a cool guy. In fact, the Wall Street Journal ran an article on him a few years ago and called him the 'Coolest Dude Alive.' He's a globetrotter with a quirky fashion sense and great taste in food and music. The kind of guy you can sit with for hours over beers and wonder where the time went. Mark wasn't the most hands-on supervisor. We didn't have set weekly meetings, and he never ordered me around. He gave me tons of space to develop my own ideas, but he was always there to provide guidance, access to his network of colleagues, and crucially, the financial support that all science students need to fund their work. It's no surprise that Mark's lab has produced about a dozen top young scientists, who are now fanning out across the US (and further afield, in my case). If I can have an ounce of the success he's had at supervising students, then I'll have a stellar career.

Personal qualities needed for success

You always have to be curious, asking questions about how the world works. That's the one most important characteristic. Of course you have to be intelligent, but without curiosity intelligence is meaningless. You need to be enthusiastic. There's no way to sugarcoat it: an academic career is difficult. Research is a step into the unknown, and it can be daunting, frustrating. You need your enthusiasm to get through it. There is a lot of criticism and rejection in the academic world: reviewers telling you your papers are crap, grant agencies rejecting your proposals. I had a review panel recently tell me that I had little in-depth knowledge of paleontology, my own research field! That one really stung. And it was ridiculous. But that kind of criticism happens, a lot. You need to be able to shrug it off. You need the mentality of a top athlete or politician: somebody who can deal with any failure and get up for the next round, and also deal with success (the high-impact papers, the funded grants) without getting a big head or going lazy. Quitters don't last long in an academic career. Neither do slackers, and believe it or not, contrary to some perceptions of the academic world, neither do jerks. And the last critical skill, I would say, is the ability to communicate. You could be the most brilliant, curious, enthusiastic, persevering academic stud in the world, but if you can't communicate your work to your peers, to the public, then nobody will realise it. Make sure you can write competently, speak passionately, design killer PowerPoint slides. Honestly, probably my best skill is that I am a good communicator. I love to write and give talks. I'm lucky that those things come naturally to me.

The rewards

Every day I wake up there is the possibility that I will discover something new about the world. That's amazing. Many people hate their jobs, get up out of bed reluctantly when the alarm rings. I always wake up before my alarm rings because I'm so excited about the day ahead. And it's not only discovering new things that is so rewarding, but it's passing along that enthusiasm to my students. Teaching and student advising is a whole lot of fun.



The challenges

I'm so well supported here in Edinburgh. There is a reason we're one of the top universities in the world—we have great facilities, great administrators, a great legacy of research and teaching. But two things are really frustrating. First, funding my research. We're in a bad time for research funding. Governments around the world have gone into austerity mode, and funding for a dinosaur dig is one of the easiest things a politician or bureaucrat can put on the chopping block. So it is a constant struggle to fund my work and even though I have been very productive in terms of publications, new discoveries, and public engagement, I have still yet to get a really big grant during my three years in Edinburgh. Rejection after rejection, some of which have been frankly humiliating. It gnaws at me every day. I'm supposed to be this great communicator and dynamic young scientist, yet I can't convince funding panels to support me. Maybe I'm being too hard on myself, but I do beat myself up over it. The second thing is that as academics we have many responsibilities, and it does feel like there aren't enough hours in the day. Research, grant writing, paper writing, fieldwork, teaching, student advising, admin, outreach. I do sometimes feel like I'm being pulled in a thousand directions at once. A really good day for me is when I have a few hours alone and I can just write, study fossils, or work with my PhD students.

Taking the next steps

I need to start getting grants. That's pretty much it. I publish a lot. I'm a good teacher and get a lot of teaching award nominations. I have great PhD students doing exciting research. I write a lot of books and popular articles, I'm on TV and radio somewhat frequently, and some of my discoveries have made international headlines. I have great colleagues and feel so remarkably comfortable in the School of GeoSciences. If I could get big grants I could become a professor before I'm too grey, but so far that's not happening.

Supporting others

Be accessible and honest. I've tried to be both in this little interview. Share your experiences. Have your door open and try to interact with your students regularly, but at the same time not be too overbearing, so they have the freedom to go down their own path and carve out their own independent thoughts and career. Be there to provide material support—feedback on research work, advice on next steps, and most importantly funding—but then gradually step away and let your students stand on their own. And do it all with enthusiasm, with passion.

