Many Roads to Success: Broadening Our Views of Academic Career Paths and Advice

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Advice is often given to junior scholars in the field of organization science to ostensibly facilitate their career success. In this commentary, we discuss insights from 19 elite scholars (i.e., Fellows and top journal editors) about the advice they received–and, often, did not follow– throughout their careers. We highlight some of the pitfalls from the current, all-too-common, and often singular advice given to junior scholars while also adding necessary nuance to the requirements to achieve success in our field. We conclude with advice on how to give better advice, thereby more equitably encouraging a new generation of increasingly diverse researchers and future professors.

Keywords: *knowledge transfer/replication; research design; research methods; open science (e.g., transparency in research practices)*

I was told to focus on one particular area, be known as an expert in one area and just stick to that, and, like I said, I couldn't do it.... [It] probably ... works for most people, but it wasn't right for me.

—Elite organization science scholar

A few years ago, a well-known senior scholar was invited to provide their advice for a group of junior scholars at an Academy of Management consortium. Their advice was categorical and clear: For junior scholars to achieve academic success, they must make some tough decisions to prioritize their work over other components of their lives. Specifically, they advised doctoral students to be (a) "once in a generation" scholars, (b) constantly available for work, and (c) willing to move every 5 or 6 years for career advancement. This advice was ostensibly well intended and is frequently given. But while this path may be a valid one for some, the implication is that it is the only—or the best—option for scholars seeking career success. Critically, advice like this can have unintended consequences for junior scholars.

We recognize that senior scholars are often asked to give advice to junior scholars in our field, with the hope that such advice will facilitate junior scholars' success. We also understand that, by and large, our institutions also reward a fairly standard definition of success comprising high research productivity, excellent teaching scores, and above-and-beyond service. Yet, advice like the kind just detailed seems pervasive to the point of being trite (i.e., we have all heard versions of this advice during our careers) while also risking discouraging and alienating specific scholars at a time when we need to expand the faculty diversity in our field. Indeed, such advice can turn away valuable future talent—especially minorities, like women in business schools (Fraser & Watson, 2020; Gooty et al., 2023)—because it reiterates the perceived necessity of abiding by overly narrow, masculine ideals and defaults (Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Kossek, Su, & Wu, 2017). This pervasive "ideal" also requires ample financial and social resources that are not consistently available to all scholars (Afonja, Salmon, Quailey, & Lambert, 2021; Gabriel et al., 2023). Perhaps most importantly, these messages also tend to conflict with modern scholars' actual pathways to success (e.g., Beigi, Shirmohammadi, & Arthur, 2018).

Is the pathway to academic success really one-size-fits-all? As a team of early-to-mid-career scholars who had received similar advice but had already begun to notice its inconsistencies compared with our own realities, we came together to capture more current and realistic perspectives on the advice given—and the advice followed—to reach the pinnacles of success in our field. To do so, we interviewed scholars who have demonstrably achieved career success—namely, those who have become Fellows in our large professional organizations (e.g., Academy of Management [AOM], Society of Industrial/Organizational Psychology [SIOP], and Strategic Management Society [SMS]). These interviews produced myriad stories about the pathways to success and advice received. Such advice often aligned with the guidance listed in our opening anecdote, yet it was not always acted on and carried out. Regardless of the path taken and advice (not) followed, each member of our sample attained a level of success that grants them respectable standing as an exemplary model for junior scholars in our field.

In summary, we offer this commentary to better contextualize the various pathways to success that exist in management/applied psychology academia (although we suspect these stories likely transcend disciplines) and the role of career advice in achieving success. We first show the breadth and variation in the advice given and taken as well as how various strategies can be enacted to achieve success in our field. On the basis of these insights, we highlight the need to broaden our collective view of success. Finally, we provide novel and more nuanced guidance to junior scholars making their way in the field while also cautioning senior scholars to think more critically about the relevance and utility of the advice they share with more junior scholars.

Paths to Academic Success: From the Mouths of Elite Scholars

In the organizational sciences, more objective standards of success often include the "tangibles" that can be easily discerned by others: obtaining tenure, having a high citation count or h-index, publishing in an elite set of journals, becoming an editor of one of such journals, and/or becoming a Fellow in one of our large professional organizations. The advice we most frequently receive relates to how to obtain promotion at an elite academic institution (e.g., a Carnegie R1 institution or a "triple crown" accredited business school[1]). Yet, we wondered if those who attain the pinnacle of success in our field may have received more varied advice and/or considered more alternative career paths rather than the more normative route.

To explore how success is attained and how advice relates to success, we asked individuals who have reached the highest levels of academic achievement to share their career stories. We contacted scholars who were Fellows of our relevant professional associations (i.e., AOM, SIOP, SMS) and/or who served as a head editor at a TAMUGA-listed journal.[2] These individuals represent the highest levels of traditionally defined success, selected for these roles due to their influence and ability to shape our field. Our interviewee pool included 19 scholars who discussed their personal trajectories toward success and the role that advice played in their journeys (see the appendix or our Open Science Framework page for more detail about our sample and procedures).[3] Next, we unpack the key themes that emerged from our interviews. Then, we use the themes generated from the interviews to discuss the divergence between the advice typically given to junior scholars and the paths that our elite scholars traversed.

Advised Versus Actual Paths to Academic Success

Our interviews clearly suggested that the patterns of advice given to junior scholars mirror existing definitions of career success in our field—that is, they are still surprisingly singular. After asking our scholars directly about the career advice they received, we expected to see some differentiation; after all, this was the initial aim of our investigation (i.e., modeling distinct configurations of advice). Yet, scholars overwhelmingly echoed the same, standard message in the advice they had received. This advice seemed to be so routine as to be unremarkable: publish (ideally, a lot and in elite journals), attain tenure, and then you will be (and feel) successful. But as we alluded to in the introduction, there is often much more involved in that advice, such as where to live (i.e., wherever the best job is located), willingness to move around the world (i.e., wherever it requires to get a job at the most prestigious institution), and even research content (i.e., topics that are trendy or popular); sometimes this advice even includes if/when to have children (i.e., not during graduate school or pretenure). However, in contrast to the simplistic and singular advice they received, the stories our scholars shared about the actual paths they followed were much more complex—as exemplified by our opening quote—suggesting that the advice being offered to our next generation is in desperate need of a "broaden and (re)build." Thus, giving static, blanket advice to junior scholars about how to be successful in our field may seem like a rite of passage, but our interviews demonstrated that a successful career path can exist outside of those prescriptions.

Perhaps more interestingly, although most interviewees received the standard advice, very few seemed to consistently follow it, showing important variability in how success is attained.

Indeed, the advice to prioritize one's career above all else seems particularly short-sighted given the findings from our interviews about the paths they did *not* take. Indeed, although we focus this commentary on the advice received and which advice to give, many of our scholars also talked about the advice they did *not* follow. Whether it was not moving to a particular location and/or not working at a particular school, choosing when to trust their own instincts or to solicit more diverse advice from a support network was important.

Family. Many scholars—both men and women—talked about choosing to prioritize their families during their careers, which went against the traditional advice they had received. One interviewee discussed how coaching their kid's soccer team was a formative component of their life, which helped them to prioritize their time and talents more appropriately at work. Another scholar said that they were told to go wherever the job required, but they pushed back on this advice and, instead, strategically chose where to work based on geography. As they recalled their decision-making process, "[I] looked at the map. I want to go to a city … and I don't want to go too far for my family … so I decided on [school]." They then prioritized getting a job in that location, calling it a "family decision." Many junior scholars are told that they cannot prioritize being in a certain location if they want to have a successful career—advice we have also heard given at AOM conferences and across various PhD programs. Yet, these scholars were successful despite (or maybe even because of) eschewing that advice. One very senior scholar said expressly, "[My success] always had to do in part with whether my family's life was going OK. I mean, it wouldn't have been successful if the family stuff had not been going well."

Research. Our interviewees also often departed from the research paths they were advised to follow in terms of their topic and research strategy. For example, scholars recalled being told that they should focus on "one particular area, be known as an expert in one area and just stick to that," avoid more applied (vs. theoretical) topics, and prioritize "publish[ing] more elites" such that "lower-tier" journals should also be avoided. In most cases, the interviewees acknowledged that even if the advice was well meant, it was not right for them—nor was it the specific path that led them to the success that they had achieved. As an example, one scholar clarified why a particularly pervasive piece of advice was harmful despite its intentions:

> You need to publish more elites [was the advice I got]. And, you know, I understand that that kind of advice is, (or) would be, good for me too. It's not that it's bad in that sense, but it is pushing the wrong button … it's outcome-focused, not behavior-focused. And so I feel like that should never be what we're doing. We should not be trying to achieve an outcome. We should be trying to do the right behaviors. And if the outcomes occur, then great, that means the system is working. But we can't count on the system working. So, it also means that we won't achieve those outcomes at times at no fault to our own … so to advise somebody to chase the outcome— instead of and perhaps at the expense of the right behaviors—is pretty bad advice.

Of note, this scholar had also consistently published in elite journals over several decades— and, counterintuitively, had done so despite ostensibly ignoring advice to do exactly that.

(Lack of) control. Building on the previous quotation, which alluded to the error of single-handedly relying on "the system," scholars did not shy away from crediting luck as a

component of success—a missing theme from the advice that was often given. Indeed, the typical advice given suggested that doing things "right" would all but guarantee success, even if that was not always the case. Thus, while career advice understandably focuses on what we can control, looking back, many scholars noted that they had "no idea what [they] were doing"—particularly early in their careers—and that they were "really lucky." This seemed not like false humility but rather a recognition that many of their colleagues often contributed similar quantities and quality of work, yet they did not reach the same level of "success." While we acknowledge the benefits of an internal locus of control (e.g., Wang, Bowling, & Eschleman, 2010), recognizing the external and environmental influences on success can help us to better understand our own careers and help our junior scholars to better chart their course.

Rethinking Academic Success

Although we did not find as much variation in the advice our successful scholars recalled as we initially expected, we discovered valuable nuance in the meaning of success. In particular, our interviewees highlighted how the meaning of success changed over time and how being successful and feeling successful in one's career did not always go hand in hand.

The Experience and Meaning of Academic Success

The dynamic meaning of success. Although our field seems to generally agree on the definition of success as we detailed already, the scholars we interviewed believed that this definition evolved for them over the course of their careers. For instance, they noted that "early on, it was defined almost exclusively by the number of top-tier papers" that they published or that it was about "getting tenure," but success then transformed into something focused more on their impact on others. Prescribing one definition of career success and expecting it to remain consistent is thus not only inaccurate but may also overlook the many different types of careers that people have—even when the profession seems to agree that they have cleared the bar of "success." For example, several scholars noted the importance of impact as an overlooked facet of career success, such as "making an impact on people," "teach[ing] and help[ing] junior scholars" to have "something . . . carried forward after you're gone," and/or bridging "the academic-practice gap [because] what good is our research if nobody uses it?"

In addition, scholars talked about having a "balance between success in your life and success in the workplace. [It's] both. Not just one or the other." These components of career success were not necessarily the topics of early career advice, but they often seemed to have the most emotional resonance with our scholars—they told us stories of students they mentored, of journals they helmed, and of the impact they had on their local communities. Some of our scholars seemed to realize this only as their careers progressed—that they were truly able to feel successful once the heavy, single-minded focus on their own tenure or publications was lifted.

Feeling successful versus being recognized as successful. Finally, reaching the metaphorical bar of success did not mean that successful scholars felt it. So, the advice to focus solely

on publications or to earn tenure to feel successful may not actually pan out. One scholar noted that they felt successful only when they went to a conference and someone said, "Wow, I know you—you're really famous!" They went on to say, "That was the moment that I felt successful for the first time—that there was actually some recognition that someone actually was reading the stuff that I was writing." One person noted that they still are "surprised" that they are a Fellow: "I'm surprised when I get invited to do keynotes, that I've been paid to lecture.... To me, it is sort of amazing." This sense of humility seemed to be a by-product of the type of advice that led scholars to consider their careers as linear paths beset by scarcity, such that even those who eventually "made it" still had a difficult time accepting that they had indeed made it.

Advice About Career Advice

Our interviews revealed that attaining success did not require adherence to a single, predetermined path. Rather, they exhibited equifinality, as scholars reported frequent departures from the traditionally advised norms and actions yet still reached the very top of the field in terms of being a Fellow and receiving top editorial role placements. There was less variance in the type of advice received than in the type of advice used. Perhaps most critically, a great deal of the advice received was ignored. Thus, as early-to-mid-career scholars, we hope these stories can be the ones that our more junior colleagues hear rather than those that uniformly subscribe to a more singular view of the path that will guarantee career success. At the same time, we acknowledge that many of our systems are built on these standards, which makes change difficult and time-consuming. But if we do not think more broadly about success and how we achieve it, our field risks the ultimate achievement of "guaranteed irrelevance" (Hoffman, 2021: 34).

With this in mind, we offer our own advice about advice (see Table 1) developed from the content of our interviews. Notice that first and foremost, we encourage asking questions rather than regurgitating conventional points. While this is most applicable to one-on-one meetings as senior scholars mentor others, we also believe the questions in Table 1 suggest that we may wish to rethink our "typical" professional development moments in the field, too. For example, sessions that have historically been prescriptive could be oriented toward more narrative storytelling, focusing on advice taken and not taken while also offering insights into when advice may be applicable to a person. This could be part of a broader shift in our field (per Hoffman, 2021) to consider alternative views of success and what that looks like.

Finally, we offer a bit of broad advice (if we may): It is okay to decline asking for advice or to decline following a specific piece of advice received—especially if unsolicited. Some of our interviewees reported that they repeatedly asked for advice, whereas others did not seek any. Some often followed the advice when it was given, while others ignored it. Nevertheless, each of these individuals achieved inclusion in our pool of elite organizational science scholars based on a shared recognition of attaining a high level of success in our field. We certainly recognize that there are often penalties for failing to follow advice, particularly from those who consider themselves experts or have higher levels of status (Blunden, Logg, Brooks, John, & Gino, 2019). Still, those who forge their own path may be just as likely as others (if not more so) to experience career success (Goering & Li, 2021)—whatever success might mean to them.

Table 1
Advice for (Better) Advice

Typical Advice	Problem	Replace with…
Success is *Z*. This should be your goal.	The meaning/experience of success varies from one individual to the next and across the career span.	What does success mean to you right now? Can I help you clarify your career goals?
Be like me—or try to be like elite scholar, Dr. *Z*.	We vary in our goals, priorities, resources, and abilities. Individuals may lack the motivation and/or ability to emulate certain scholars, and giving them a narrow focus may distract them from a more fulfilling one.	I am happy to share my career story with you, but remember that we're all different. My path does not need to be yours. Whom do you see that represents what you want in life? Can I help connect you with people you want to emulate? Maybe their stories can inspire or inform you.
You will have attained success when…	The experience of success is subjective. Obtaining objective metrics (e.g., tenure) may feel anticlimactic; people sometimes do not allow themselves to fully appreciate or experience more subjective aspects of success (e.g., being recognized at a conference or successfully managing a work-family interface).	Tell me when you feel successful. Let me help you celebrate your wins—whatever you feel they may be. Share your excitement and pride with me.
Your career must come first.	Some individuals do not want to prioritize career above all else, and others are not able to do this. This advice may discourage junior scholars, causing them to leave the field, experience emotional distress, and/or disrupt their balance ideals.	Only you can determine what your work-life balance is. Know that many scholars can find high levels of fulfillment in both their work and their home lives at once. Some choose to prioritize one versus the other, and outcomes vary from one scholar to the next. I respect your priorities.
Avoid *Z* topic. Focus your research on *Z*.	This works for some scholars but not others. Those who follow this advice may feel they are missing out on opportunities to do what they perceive as more meaningful work, or they may avoid topics that could allow for stronger intrinsic motivation or impact.	It may benefit you to study *Z* topic, and it could be necessary to focus on this if you want to work specifically with Dr. *Z*. However, you may be interested in pursuing your own unique interests. Can I help connect you with experts in the areas you are excited to study?
You control your outcomes.	Two individuals with similar abilities could follow similar paths and still reach very different destinations. Some elements of success involve luck and, thus, are predominately outside of our control.	Success in this field requires high levels of ability and work ethic. However, you could do everything "right" and still end up failing to reach your goals due to factors outside of your control. Learning the limits of what you have—and do not have—control over can help you to better navigate the ups and downs of this career.

Conclusion

As foreshadowed in our opening quote, we aimed to bridge advice-reality gaps in terms of what advice matters to achieve success in our academic discipline. In doing so, we hoped to reimagine the unnecessarily constrained and often limited models of "success," thereby reducing barriers for those who cannot imagine their professional lives fitting into such a specific—and constrained—vision. After all, *career* comes from Latin and French, meaning to "run [usually at full speed] a [race]course or road."[4] As our current cohorts continue and our future generations embark on their fast-paced professional journeys, we highlight the

untapped value in mapping the multiple roads, destinations, and potential detours along the way, as well as the various speeds depending on the driver, passenger, and road conditions.

Appendix

Sample

Our study population was "elite scholars" in the field of management and applied industrial organizational (I/O) psychology. We built a sampling frame database using specific parameters to define "eliteness." On the basis of our literature review, we defined elite scholars as professors in management or I/O psychology who are externally accepted as being highly successful, as defined by being appointed as a Fellow to at least one of three specific professional organizations: the Academy of Management (AOM), the Society of Industrial-Organizational Psychology (SIOP), and the Strategic Management Society (SMS). To illustrate, AOM is the premier professional association for global organization science scholars, boasting more than 18,000 members from 110 countries.[1] Each year, AOM selects 10 members to award the title of Fellow. In general, Fellows are distinguished scholars who have contributed to the science and practice of management and I/O psychology.

As of August 2023, AOM had 260 Fellows, SIOP had 508 Fellows, and SMS had 62 Fellows.[2] We also targeted the editors in chief (EICs) of seven top management and I/O psychology journals (if those editors were not already on our Fellows list). This list gave us a full population of elite scholars in management and I/O psychology, as defined by this metric.

Each scholar was labeled as male or female (i.e., gender) and as United States/Canada (i.e., location) or elsewhere based on publicly available information and personal knowledge. Using a 2 (gender) × 2 (location) matrix, we employed stratified purposeful sampling, extracting a simple sample from within each stratum from our list (per Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013) to create a first-stage interview list. From this list, we then contacted participants in a random order.

Qualitative researchers often refer to the magic number of six interviews (Guest et al., 2013) as a demarcation because approximately 70% of total codes are often employed within the first six interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). However, to ensure saturation and content coverage, we often need more than this, particularly when the sample is more heterogenous and the topic is complex (Guest et al., 2013). Thus, we began with six interviews and then randomly sampled from the strata described earlier. We then added interviewees based on the strata we identified and elite scholars' agreement to participate.

Our final sample included 19 scholars (11 women, eight men). Six were from the AOM Fellows list, 10 were from the SIOP list, and one was a Fellow of both organizations (unfortunately, no SMS Fellows agreed to participate). We also interviewed two EICs. Sixteen of our 19 respondents resided in the United States. Most of our respondents were White (70%).

Procedure. We conducted video interviews (e.g., via Zoom) with each person who consented to participate in the study using a semistructured interview protocol. For consistency, our interviewers practiced the interviews on one another prior to interviewing participants for consistency. After conducting each interview, we transcribed the interviews and wrote short memos to each other about any methodological issues observed during the interview and to highlight initial impressions regarding the research questions. In addition, we corresponded

via email as the interviews continued, returning to the sampling frame to select additional interview targets to ensure content coverage using a theoretical sampling approach. We continued this process until new themes no longer arose during the interview process (i.e., thematic saturation), which was achieved at 19 interviews. We used in vivo and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2021) to allow participants' own words to define the emergent themes. These themes were used to inform the results that we share in our commentary.

Interview Protocol

1. First, we want to talk broadly about your career journey. Where did you start your academic career?
2. How did you get to where you are in your academic career today?
3. Can you tell me about any key moments you can think of that were "fork in the road" moments? Like when you knew this was the direction you were going to go, or perhaps you weren't sure?
4. How, if at all, has your definition of success in academia changed over the course of your career?
5. When have you felt unsuccessful in your career, or like you "failed"? How did you get through it?
6. Do you feel "successful"? If so, when did you start feeling "successful"—do you remember that feeling?
7. What do you *not* want to be? What sort of success do you not want?
8. How is your view of success different from how you think other people define success?
9. How much of your success would you attribute to advice you have received from others?
10. What's the most valuable career advice you've been given? What makes it so valuable?
11. Can you tell me about the most harmful career advice you can remember getting?
12. Can you tell me about the first career advice you can remember getting after you entered academia?
13. Can you remember a time that you wished you had been given—or maybe you wish you hadn't been given—advice about your career?
14. What advice has been the most impactful for you, for better or for worse?
15. Have you noticed differences or changes in the types of advice you received at different points of your career?
16. Has the type of advice you have given to others about academic careers changed over time? How so?
17. Can you tell us about any other factors that influenced your career, such as your family structure, et cetera?
18. Finally, can you tell us if there is any career advice you would give to management or I/O psychology PhD students? What might you tell them?

Notes

1.   See https://aom.org/membership for more information.
2.   See https://my.aom.org/leadership/toc.aspx?action=AFFIL&code=FELLOWS, https://www.siop.org/Membership/SIOP-Fellowship/Fellows-All, and https://www.strategicmanagement.net/award/sms-fellows/ for more information.

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Notes

1. See https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/ and https://find-mba.com/for more information.

2. This list includes *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Strategic Management Journal*, *Organization Science*, *Personnel Psychology*, and *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.

3. Of our interviewees, 57.9% were women, 84.2% were U.S. residents, and 70% were White. Our Open Science Framework also contains more details about our sample, design, and procedure: https://osf.io/jbcge/?view_only=9e6b7e704d774cc7b5fc53df51f0db82.

4. See https://www.etymonline.com/word/career for more information.

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