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So You Want to Work at a Teaching College?

By Jordan Cofer

During my graduate-student orientation, one professor began her talk with her own Horatio Alger story: She'd worked her way up from a teaching-focused college, where she'd found it agonizing to face a steady stream of students in her office, to a coveted position at a research university, where, she happily noted, faculty members don't get bogged down in student drama.

I remember her talk so vividly because what seemed so repulsive to her sounded like an ideal job for me. I made it a point to track her down later and learn exactly which college she was talking about, so I could watch for openings there.

Of course, not all professors at major universities look down on teaching or on teaching colleges. My dissertation adviser used to tell me that any job was a good job. Now that I work at a teaching college, however, I've come to realize that a majority of Ph.D.-granting programs — at least in the humanities — are unfamiliar with the faculty profile of a "teaching school." Candidates who apply to colleges like mine are often ill-prepared for the realities of faculty work and life there.

What is it really like? Here are the two most common misconceptions about teaching colleges:

- That they are a smaller version of a research university, populated by faculty members who couldn't take the stress of a high-pressure job.
- That they are an ideal place for academic burnouts who refuse to publish and so just teach a full load of students and go home.

The truth is that teaching colleges are neither of those things. In fact, the term "teaching school" can feel like a misnomer. I realized during my first year of teaching five classes a semester that faculty members with a 2-2 load at a research university actually had much more time to devote to their teaching than I had for mine. Even as someone who aspired to work at a teaching college (and who attended one as an undergraduate), I was not

entirely prepared for the job.

Working at a teaching college is not without its frustrations, but it is rewarding work. More than that, it's the right kind of work for the right kind of graduate.

When I was hired, I imagined that, as an assistant professor, I would teach some intro courses but would spend most of my time with English majors who wanted to discuss the concepts I had studied in graduate school. I envisioned long conversations on hermeneutics and lively exchanges on, say, how Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth had shaped Flannery O'Connor's fiction.

Nine years later, that conversation has never happened — not with my colleagues or with my students. Instead, I've found my work to be much more rewarding.

While I don't always get to talk about my scholarly passions on the campus (a colleague once told me that's what conferences were for), I do get wedding invitations, birth announcements, email updates, Facebook messages, and even surprise home visits from former students. I've had my share of students sobbing in my office — over the death of a parent during finals week, over struggles with their sexuality, and, yes, over their grades.

Working closely with so many students at teaching college, you learn to take a "whole child" approach to your students — offering guidance on writing, studying, and life in general. Every year I'm surprised by the challenges that my students face. While this type of close work with undergraduates is demanding, it is also deeply rewarding and probably not scalable in a consumer-driven, large-public-university model of education.

Do you really want to work here? Many students come to a teaching-focused college for a reason. They want that close contact with their professors. They like small classes. Students who come to our college and start complaining that we don't have the amenities of a big university (Division I sports, luxury student centers, etc.) are usually not happy here.

It's very similar with faculty hires. When we are discussing a potential hire, a colleague of mine often asks, "Does the candidate want a job or *this* job?"

So let me be clear: At a teaching college, you will be expected to teach, on average, four courses a semester; advise students; participate in service work both on the campus and in your discipline; and pursue scholarship — pretty much in that order. Although we expect professors to stay current in their disciplines (faculty success often equates to

student success), your publishing record is not the priority here.

Instead, at many teaching colleges, the single most important factor we consider in hiring is "fit." By that I mean: Is the candidate's drive for intellectual inquiry in balance with the teaching mission of the college? Yes we value your scholarly work, but we are more interested in your ability to create and deliver a wide variety of courses and to deeply mentor students.

At a teaching college, you might teach classes across the spectrum of your discipline, forcing you to prepare new and innovative course material frequently, while advising a club and working on your own research. Successful faculty members here quickly learn to translate their narrow research agenda into a more generalist narrative — an important skill that graduate schools could focus on.

Over the past few years, as part of a professional organization to which I belong, I have had the pleasure of mentoring a promising Ph.D. student. Some of the job-market advice this student has received has only confirmed my own experience — that doctoral programs are unaware of how a "teaching school" really functions.

That unfamiliarity is, at the least, part of the problem with the current job market. Often doctoral programs prepare their students only for a hypothetical interview at a research university. But aspects of that sort of interview are not always of great importance at a teaching college. For instance, we almost always prefer a polished teaching demonstration to a research talk.

The solution. As a faculty member and administrator involved in many searches, I've noticed a lot of commonalities in the way Ph.D.s are prepared for interviews — and jobs — in our sector of higher education. Here is one response to doctoral programs wondering how to improve their training on this front: Ask teaching colleges.

In the same way that my institution often reaches out to employers to ask what they'd like to see from our graduates, a university should reach out to the teaching colleges hiring its Ph.D.s. Ask for feedback on what those colleges would like to see in your Ph.D.s. Ask our faculty members to come and talk about what it is really like to work on our campuses. Let us give your graduate students (and faculty members) the ins and outs of how a search works at a teaching college.

In the same vein, graduate programs could develop a "teaching track," so that those who

think they want to work at a teaching-oriented college could get a better sense of what faculty life there really looks like — the pros and the cons. Doing so would also allow students to make connections in their own professional network and send them into the job market better prepared.

Working at a teaching college is not without its frustrations, but it is rewarding work. More than that, it's the right kind of work for the right kind of graduate. Research universities have something to learn from the community college, the teaching college, or the tech college down the road: how best to prepare Ph.D.s for a career, or at least a first job, at those institutions.

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