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How to Prepare for a Teaching Career

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ADVICE

How to Prepare for a Teaching Career



Jon Krause for The Chronicle Review

By James M. Lang | JANUARY 08, 2017

Question: I was wondering if you could elaborate on the differences in preparing for a career at a research-first versus teaching institution. I've learned all about what's expected in my field for a job at a major research university — the importance of getting papers out, ideally in high-impact journals — but what should I do differently if my career aim instead is to find a job at a teaching-oriented college?

Lang: I received that message in response to a column I wrote last fall on "Why You Might Love Working at a Teaching College." The reader was drawn to my arguments, but his doctoral program in a STEM field at an Ivy League institution offered him no perspectives or resources

on preparing for the type of career I had described.

His question struck me with special force because I had just returned from a European university where I'd given some workshops, one of which focused on preparing for a successful faculty career. In that session at least two graduate students explained that they had mostly abandoned plans for a faculty career because they did not feel the interest in, or the capacity for, intensive, groundbreaking research in their field. They wanted to focus on teaching, but had the impression that doing so would close out any prospects of becoming a university faculty member.

They were pleasantly surprised when I explained that literally thousands of U.S. colleges hire faculty members whose primary role is teaching. Pens poised, they likewise asked me how to prepare for careers on teaching-oriented campuses.

What follows represents one person's perspective, and I encourage academics at other teaching-intensive institutions to supplement my advice with their own thoughts on a career at colleges and universities like ours. Equally welcome would be the insights of graduate advisers who have successful track records of placing their doctoral students in faculty positions at teaching-oriented colleges.

My perspective stems less from anything I did to find a job at a teaching-intensive college (since my job search concluded some 16 years ago now) than from my experience of sitting on a dozen or so search committees — in fields ranging from theology to chemistry — during my time as a faculty member. My advice is aimed at students like my questioner (whose email I have quoted with his permission), who still have at least a year or more left on their Ph.D. program, and have time to reorient their career trajectory. To those faculty aspirants, I offer the following three pieces of advice.

Get teaching experience. As much of it as you can. Find opportunities to teach in your field as a doctoral student, preferably as the instructor of record. You don't need to have taught a dozen courses to make yourself an attractive candidate to a college like mine, but having taught at least a few will provide your application with a significant boost. In some fields, like English or foreign languages, graduate students teach introductory courses as part of their training. I'm not sure I have ever seen an application for a position in our English department, for example, from someone who had not taught at least a couple of composition or introductory literature courses. The same may be true in other fields in the humanities and social sciences.

But teaching opportunities will arise less frequently for doctoral students in STEM fields, and may be limited to things like giving a lecture within a faculty member's course or serving as a lab supervisor. Hiring committees at our colleges know that. We recognize that a doctoral student in chemistry will be unlikely to have the same kind of classroom experience as one in English.

If your program offers limited training and experience in teaching, you can help yourself by actively seeking out classroom opportunities wherever you can find them. Ask your supervisor if you can assist with a course. If you are nearing the end of your program, try to find an adjunct gig at a nearby college, including summer courses. Educate yourself about teaching online (with books like this one), and apply to teach an online course. Make sure the postdoctoral positions for which you are applying provide teaching experience.

I have even seen applications from candidates who were not given the chance to teach in their Ph.D. programs, but who hunted down opportunities to teach at summer camps or yoga centers.

Classroom experience as a doctoral student matters for two essential reasons:

- First, we want to know that you are committed to teaching. You won't survive on a campus like mine — where you will teach six, seven, eight, or even ten courses a year — unless you love to teach. We don't want you to arrive here and discover, after your first semester of full-time teaching, that you hate it.
- Second, we want you to be successful here. Transitioning from a pure research orientation to teaching eight courses a year will be incredibly difficult if you have no classroom experience whatsoever, and we don't want to set you up for failure.

Get educated about teaching. As you are gaining classroom experience, start educating yourself about teaching and learning in higher education. That has become increasingly easy to do with the growth of teaching centers at research universities, the wealth of available literature on effective teaching at the college level, and the ability to learn and connect with other educators via social-media sites like Twitter.

The easiest way to start is by taking advantage of your own university's teaching center. It might, confusingly, go under a variety of names: center for teaching excellence, center for teaching and learning, center for teaching, and so on. Especially at a research university, these centers often have staff members whose work is specifically dedicated to helping graduate students become effective teachers. Make an appointment.

The teaching center probably also offers regular events — lunch discussions, visiting speakers, workshops — focused on specific topics. It might have a website with extensive resources (such as the ones provided by Vanderbilt's Center for Teaching Excellence or Carnegie Mellon's Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence and Educational Innovation), and a lending library of books on teaching and learning in higher education. Attend these events. Poke around the website. Read a book on teaching every summer.

Your goal on this front is to help you become more informed as both a job applicant and a future faculty member. You should understand the major teaching approaches of your field — not just the one your adviser favors or the ones you experienced as an undergraduate. Expand your understanding of what's possible in college teaching.

Sitting on a hiring committee, I would expect candidates in STEM fields, for example, to know the meaning of terms like "flipped classroom" or "active learning." I would be impressed and delighted if applicants spontaneously mentioned their interest in community-service learning, "Reacting to the Past," or team-based learning. Such comments would suggest that you are curious about teaching — a quality that will help sustain you through a 40-year career in the classroom.

Get outside your department. If you do some of the things I've just recommended, you will be on your way toward fulfilling my third piece of advice, which is to get out of your lab, cubicle, or home office and try to gain a wider view of the way academe works.

Remember: Tenure at an institution like mine is granted on the basis of teaching, research, and service. The last of those three elements typically will not make or break your job application or tenure bid, but it can provide an avenue to give your application a distinctive stamp.

Service at our colleges takes many forms but frequently consists of sitting on collegewide or departmental committees, advising students or student organizations, and taking the initiative to create or support study-abroad programs, community service, or other co-curricular activities with students. Doctoral students don't receive many invitations to sit on university committees, so we wouldn't expect you to have much experience along those lines.

But we would be impressed to learn that you had, as with teaching, taken the initiative to gain service experience. Perhaps you started a speaker series in your department, volunteered to serve as the graduate representative on a search committee, or worked on an educational campaign in an area connected to your field. Such activities will give you a wider view of academe — and one that will be absolutely critical for your success in a teaching career.

Whenever I am asked to write a letter of support for a tenure candidate on my campus, I always include at least one full paragraph on the work they have done as a citizen of the college, serving on committees, co-curricular activities, and advising. Those activities matter to us. They demonstrate a commitment to the kind of personalized education we promise to our students. Your awareness of that commitment can help you stand out against otherwise equally qualified candidates who have remained strictly focused on completing their dissertations and fulfilling their Ph.D. obligations.

Following all these suggestions should of course not get in the way of your most important work as a graduate student: conducting your research and completing your dissertation. But you might find that learning more about teaching or the institution as a whole provides you with some valuable perspectives on why you are pursuing that research, how it matters to the institution and the wider world, and how it might eventually connect with your work as a teacher — all of which will help make you a better informed future faculty member, no matter what type of faculty career you ultimately choose to seek.

*James M. Lang is a professor of English and director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College in Worcester, Mass. His latest book, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons From the Science of Learning*, was published in the spring of 2016. Follow him on Twitter at @LangOnCourse.*

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We're not a research university, and we don't interview like one.