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# Why You Might Love Working at a Teaching College

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ADVICE

## Why You Might Love Working at a Teaching College

Our institution may not be your dream job, but it could well lead to a deeply satisfying career



Jon Krause for The Chronicle Review

By James M. Lang | OCTOBER 30, 2016

A few years ago, when I was directing the honors program at my college, I had the pleasure of teaching a bright and talented sophomore who wanted to pursue a Ph.D. after graduation. Throughout his junior year, he would update me on his studies during both informal chats and formal meetings about his progress. He had his sights set on graduate school and the academic life.

Early in his senior year, I ran into him one morning and asked how his graduate-school plans were proceeding. They had been postponed, he said. He didn't have enough money to take the GREs in time to apply to graduate programs for next year. I knew from previous

conversations that his financial situation was precarious. Like a third of the students on my campus, he was a first-generation college student. His father was unemployed, and his mother earned low wages. To help make ends meet, he worked more than 30 hours a week at a local store.

Even knowing that, I was stunned and saddened to think that the cost of a standardized test would stand in the way of him pursuing his academic dream. Later that day, I drafted a long email to our provost, asking if I could dip into the honors-program budget to pay for his GREs. I was expecting a negative reply, couched in administrative fears about setting poor precedents, tight budgets, etc. I was already considering what other resources I could tap when the message came back from the provost: Of course we could help him.

We covered the cost of his GREs, and that student has now completed his master's and is working toward his Ph.D. at a major research university in the South. I bump into him occasionally on social media or via email, and every time I do, I am reminded of the generosity of our provost in stepping up to help this young man.

I tell that story to illustrate a sentiment I heard over and over again at a recent conference I attended for graduate students interested in faculty careers at teaching-oriented colleges. The participants included graduate students and postdocs from around New England, staffers and administrators who help those students, and faculty and administrators from teaching-intensive campuses in the region (including community colleges, regional universities, and liberal-arts colleges like mine).

Our shared objective at the conference was to help graduate students see the pathways to a faculty career outside of the traditional research university. Paula Krebs, one of the conference organizers and a dean at Bridgewater State University — and the author of a blog focused on creating partnerships between research and teaching institutions — invited me to speak at the event's opening panel, "What Does a Career at a Teaching-Intensive Institution Look Like?" I was joined by the president of a regional master's university, the director of undergraduate research at another such university, and the vice president for academic affairs at a community college.

We talked about things like tenure expectations, adjunct labor practices, and teaching loads. These would-be professors no doubt heard things that gave them pause. They learned, for example, that faculty members at community colleges tend to teach five courses a semester, while at master's universities, the more likely number is three or four. Either way, that number represented more courses than most of the audience members had ever taught.

The final question that Dean Krebs posed to the panelists was perhaps designed to end things on a positive note: "What are the rewards of teaching at institutions like ours?" she asked us. "Why should these graduate students think about careers with us?"

I was immediately struck by the extent to which all four of us on the panel sounded a similar theme. We all talked about how our institutions gave us the opportunity to make a palpable, positive difference to the young people who enrolled in our courses and visited our offices. We all worked with large populations of first-generation college students and with students who worked long hours to help pay for school. We all took great satisfaction in helping them discover new opportunities in their lives.

Later that afternoon, I listened to a community-college instructor describe an extensive résumé of social-justice work he had done before becoming a faculty member. During his first few years at the community college, he found himself too busy to engage in that work to the same degree, and that had depressed him. He wondered what had happened to his passion for helping the poor, the marginalized, those who needed help gaining access to opportunities for self-improvement.

Three years into his stint as a faculty member, he experienced a sudden revelation: He was doing that work every single day.

His courses were brimming with first-generation students seeking to break cycles of poverty in their families, with people from traditionally underrepresented demographics who were obtaining knowledge and skills for better careers, with adults who were looking for new sources of meaning and support in their lives. He and his colleagues offered the miracle of education to these students every day.

On my campus, we feel that same passion. What you should know about the story of that honor student we helped is just how commonplace such efforts are at teaching-intensive institutions. I witness or hear similar stories from my colleagues all the time. In almost every case, faculty efforts to help a struggling student are supported by a member of the staff or administration somewhere on campus.

More times than I would care to count, I have been asked — not by a student but by a faculty adviser — to contribute a letter of recommendation for some student's application for a grant or special program. Every week I see colleagues working with students late into the afternoon, helping them master some skill that has eluded them in class. At least once a semester every one of my colleagues meets with a dozen or more students to advise them on planning courses, succeeding at college, or choosing a career. We have the distinct pleasure of observing the transition of these advisees from tentative, nervous freshmen into fully fledged, confident seniors.

I'm not suggesting here that a faculty career at a teaching college is superior to one at a research university, or that our work matters more than scholarship. I benefit enormously from the contributions of researchers in my field; the work that I do with my students would not be possible without it. Scholars fully deserve the credits and accolades that attach to their work.

I also have no doubt that faculty members at research universities make a difference in the lives of their students, too.

At teaching institutions, though, making such a difference constitutes the main focus of our work. We are drawn to the job from a devotion to students — we are evaluated on it and rewarded for it in the tenure-and-promotion process. It constitutes the fuel that fires our passions. I see it every semester in the dedication of my colleagues, and I heard it from the mouths of every professor or administrator who spoke at that conference.

I hope the graduate students who were there, and those who may be reading these words, will consider whether this noble work speaks to their passions as well. I hope as well that more of us at teaching-oriented campuses will find ways to tell our stories and to invite graduate students to see how careers at institutions like ours can lead to deeply satisfying lives.

Last week I was sitting in a department meeting when one of my colleagues mentioned that a recent graduate had secured her first job as director of communications at a small nearby college. We all exclaimed in delight; every faculty member in that room knew this student, who had been one of our departmental stars. We had all either taught her or knew her by reputation from hallway conversations or from reading her work in the student newspaper.

An inspiring student, a faculty joined in support of her achievements, a table of committed colleagues appreciating her success: At a teaching-intensive institution, it was just another day on the campus.

*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, @LangOnCourse.*

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