



SO YOU
WANT
TO BE A
EDUCATOR?
An Inside Look at an Academic Career

*"Those who can, do; those who can't,
teach"? Not a chance! One social
work educator debunks this
myth about teaching as*

*he examines this
demanding but
rewarding career.*

BY DAVID ROYSE, PHD

What is it like to be a college professor? Teaching a class of bright, motivated students can be great fun—particularly when there's stimulating discussion that involves the class, when a student or guest presents a fascinating case, or when a debate or presentation provokes a new way of thinking about a topic we thought we understood. And, there are the times when you improvise a particularly apt example that resonates well with the class or crack a joke that gets everyone laughing—at times like these it feels as if teaching at the college level is the greatest job in the world. And, indeed, it may be. Many aspire to be faculty members, but how much do you really know about the job and its responsibilities?

To be candid, it is not a joy to teach every class. Merely thinking about teaching some of them is enough to make you want to pull the covers over your head and hide the rest of the morning. Once in a while, a group of students will be irritable, unpleasant, or as lively as gravestones. Then there are students who have no interest in the required course you've been assigned to teach and the ones who work full time or party too much and never have time for course readings and assignments. There are also ungrateful and rude students who talk or read newspapers in class and students who create ugly situations by cheating. One teacher reached the breaking point with a perennially tardy student who clomped, clomped, clomped across the floor of a wooden lecture hall 15 minutes into each class meeting. Finally the instructor screamed at the student—who promptly shouted back. Not a pleasant situation for anyone.

INFLUENCES

No single explanation accounts for the reason individuals choose life in academia. A dynamic teacher in high school or college may have been an inspirational role model. I had one or two of those along the way, but also a few who were so bad that I remember thinking—even as a teenager—that I could do better. If you have been an excellent student, it is likely that a teacher has encouraged you to consider continuing your education and perhaps suggested that you become a faculty member yourself. Or, maybe you are attracted to the idea of working nine months yearly and having summers free.

Salaries aren't bad. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (April), average beginning salaries for new assistant professors at institutions with academic ranks ranged from \$47,446 to \$51,268 last year. Higher salaries are found at private, independent schools—\$50,111 to \$55,686—and doctoral institutions, which average \$55,404. Religiously affiliated institutions and schools with only baccalaureate programs tend to offer lower salaries.

After achieving tenure and being promoted to associate professor (generally after four

to six years), one might expect an average salary at all institutions to range from \$56,883 to \$61,055, with private, independent schools paying \$60,201 to \$65,396 and doctoral institutions averaging \$64,953. After another four to six years and promotion to professor, salaries average \$75,425 to \$85,437 at all institutions, \$86,455 to 98,625 in private schools, and \$94,788 in universities with doctoral programs. It is not unusual for especially productive faculty members with grants and publications to command salaries exceeding \$100,000.

Another plus is that most universities provide great fringe benefits, including

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401k retirement plans, life insurance, and continuation of health insurance after retirement. Many schools provide tuition discounts or tuition-free education for children of faculty members.

And, don't forget the accoutrements that attracted you to a university in the first place—the library, the parklike grounds or buildings, the faculty, recreational facilities, the computer lab or technology resources. Additionally, many faculty enjoy working from home, rather than being tied to an office 40 hours a week. Universities tend to be pleasant places to work, offering such advantages as day care centers and many opportunities for cultural and intellectual enrichment.

MYTHS

What, then, are the negatives associated with choosing a teaching career? First of all, it is a myth that faculty work only nine months of the year. True, teaching may be required for only two semesters or three quarters, but if you are hired by a university that prides itself on scholarship, research, or graduate programs, you are expected to write grants, conduct research, and publish. Because of their teaching loads or involvement in the community or student advising, some faculty members find it nearly impossible to meet professional writing obligations until school is out for summer. They look forward to the relative freedom of that time to finish a manuscript or analyze data for a second or third one.

Another myth is that faculty work only those hours when they are scheduled to teach and maybe a few additional hours when they grade papers or prepare. While most departments include tenured faculty members who don't work as hard as they should, conscientious faculty work much more than 40 hours weekly. At many research universities, teaching is considered approximately one-half of the average faculty member's responsibilities. However, teaching loads vary enormously—from one or two courses per term at doctoral institutions to three, four, or even five courses per term at two-year and some four-year institutions. Unlike taking four or five courses as a student, the preparation and grading that accompanies teaching that number of courses leaves little time for much else.

Preparing for a class that one has not previously taught can easily take four to six hours per hour of lecture—less when one has taught the course already. Grading might require as little as one hour per course if the class is small to one hour per student if a 15- to 20-page term paper is involved.

To the preparation, lecturing, and grading of assignments, one must add inestimable time for committee meetings (admissions, curriculum, budget, and search committees) both inside the department and within the larger university, as well as student advising (both the formal kind dealing with scheduling, field placements, and career decisions and the informal type in which students drop in for urgent counseling). One must attend orientations for new students, alumni gatherings, honors and recognition ceremonies, graduations, halls of fame, lunches with prospective faculty members, and sessions to learn new technologies. If you teach in a school where students write theses or dissertations, there are meetings to examine proposals and drafts. If your days are packed full, evenings and weekends may be spent reading student papers or trying to remain abreast of literature in your field.

WHAT YOU MAY NOT KNOW ABOUT TEACHING

While teaching is often enjoyable—even energizing—it can also be stressful. You may have to leave your comfort zone and teach outside the area that you know best. In fact, until you obtain tenure, you may seldom have the opportunity to select courses. You may be sent to off-campus locations three or four hours from main campus because none of the senior faculty wants to travel. If one of the other faculty takes a sabbatical, goes on pregnancy leave, or nabs a large grant, you may be asked to teach a course in addition to your other duties.

Maybe you won't have to drive off-campus, but the dean approaches you to teach a course by interactive television. Doesn't sound stressful? What if the course were going to multiple classrooms? What do you do when students 75 miles away can see you on TV but have no sound? What about when the signal is lost? That's to say nothing about the normal stress that accompanies trying to be erudite and eloquent while standing before a group of people. Teaching is a bit like performing. This aspect can be positive or negative, depending upon your comfort level.

Although I've been a college teacher for 20 years, I still become a bit anxious before a class if I believe that all of the material might not get covered or if I have a gut feeling that I haven't prepared enough. I also worry that I've given too much or too little homework or when a test seems too difficult. I agonize over grades and whether my instruction was at fault or students simply didn't devote enough time. Good teachers can't help but feel responsible when bright students don't seem to grasp material.

PUBLISH OR PERISH

In addition to the instructional part of the job, college faculty in most institutions are expected to conduct original research and publish results to obtain tenure and keep their positions. More specifically, it is assumed that the assistant professor will publish, on average, approximately two professional journal articles yearly or eight to 12 within the four to six years before seeking promotion to associate professor. Many universities expect that a faculty member will obtain a large grant from a foundation or the federal government. In the most prestigious institutions, there may be a requirement—perhaps not written, but understood—that a faculty member will author a seminal book in addition to writing noteworthy journal articles. Not every publication “counts.” Articles in magazines, newsletters, or in-house publications that are not refereed or selected by a jury process may go unrecognized. Further, the strongest schools may pay more attention to the number of times that an author is cited by other authors than to a certain number of publications. The idea is for

faculty to obtain national reputations that reflect favorably upon the institution.

Therefore, in addition to a faculty member's teaching responsibilities, advising, and attendance at faculty and committee meetings, a significant amount of time is spent preparing grant proposals, conducting research, or writing—either journal or book manuscripts. As if it weren't enough to become intimately familiar with the literature on a social problem or intervention, to identify a gap in knowledge, create hypotheses for investigation, formulate a sound research methodology, collect and analyze the data, then draft a manuscript—imagine doing these tasks multiple times yearly. Once an article has been written and mailed, it may be three to nine months or longer before one

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hears from the journal. And, if the article is rejected for publication, one must revise it, send it to another journal, and, once again, wait for word on its fate.

Unlike submissions to for-profit publications, it is considered unethical to send an identical manuscript to several journals simultaneously. Professional etiquette requires sending to only one journal at a time. Worse than the waiting is that as months pass, the manuscript gets “cold” and you may not remember why you wrote something the way you did, coded data a certain way, or where you found a quotation that's missing the author and journal title.

COMMUNITY SERVICE

In addition to teaching and writing, a third component to most faculty members' job description is community service. Most

of us are flattered when asked to participate on an agency's advisory board or to consult with a community group—even if we can't charge for our time. Faculty do have expertise and become known to social service agencies when supervising student practicums. It's not that community service tasks take so much time on a monthly basis—although they can, depending upon the project—but they nibble away at one's productivity and constitute interruptions when many faculty require blocks of time to conduct research and write.

ARE YOU SUITED FOR AN ACADEMIC CAREER?

Here are some considerations if you are interested in teaching at the college level. To start, it is essential that you have the grades to gain admission to a doctoral program as well as the motivation and stamina to finish it. Plan on taking three to four years to complete a doctoral degree.

While most schools still have a few faculty members with master's degrees only, the vast majority of social work programs prefer to hire new social work faculty with a PhD or those who have only to complete a dissertation.

Second, don't deceive yourself into believing that as faculty you'll be able to do only those tasks that you love doing, such as teaching. If you know that writing is not one of your strong suits, then begin to tackle the problem now. Don't believe for even a fraction of a second that you will have enough time in any new faculty position to work on writing skills. It helps if you like to write, but more importantly, you must be good at it to obtain tenure in all but regional colleges and two-year institutions where only teaching is expected.

Third, you must conceptualize and conduct interesting research. A former student applied to a PhD program at a noted university and was upset when his application was rejected. He was told that despite good grades, he “had no research agenda, no passion or special interest for which he needed research training.” Becoming a tenured faculty member usually means choosing an area of practice or a social problem and devoting a large part of your life to examining and contributing to knowledge in that field.

The wonderful aspect of an academic career is that the average professor's job is tremendously varied and hugely rewarding—well, maybe not every day. However, most days I can't imagine doing anything else.



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