

Facing the Truth

By James M. Lang

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Last month I visited two research universities to give talks to graduate students about how to prepare themselves to apply for -- and succeed in -- faculty positions at colleges that put a higher premium on teaching than research.

In the talks, I emphasized the importance of showcasing the teaching that the students had done in graduate school and of learning how to present that experience to appeal to search committees at liberal-arts colleges like mine. At the end of one of the talks, a graduate student raised his hand and asked a question that I should have anticipated.

"I'm in the sciences," he said, "and we don't teach in my graduate program. If I finish my degree without any teaching experience at all, will I have any hopes of getting a job at a school like yours?"

As I stood there behind the dais on the raised platform, contemplating how to answer, I felt exactly the way I had when my 8-year-old asked me to tell her the truth: Santa Claus or no Santa Claus?

I hated to be the bearer of bad news, but I couldn't lie to my daughter, and I couldn't lie to this graduate student, either.

"I'm sorry to be the one to say it to you," I told him, "but without any teaching experience at all, a search committee at my college wouldn't consider your application."

I could see a few bodies shift uncomfortably at that and people exchanging uneasy looks. I didn't want to find out later that my post-talk dinner venue had been moved to Wendy's, so I tried to explain my answer more fully.

"Look," I said. "It's not a personal judgment on you, or even a prediction that you won't be able to handle the teaching responsibilities you'd have at my institution. The issue is more about whether we are willing to take a chance on someone who might think she wants to teach -- but who finds out, in her first year, that she much prefers formulae to students.

"If that happens, not only have we made you miserable and wasted a year of your life but now we're investing the time and money for a new search for the same position all over again. We want to know that you are committed to teaching and that you are in this for the long haul."

I'm guessing that my explanation didn't do much for any hopes that graduate student might have had of finding a faculty position at a small, liberal-arts college.

And it didn't tell the whole truth. We're concerned about our students as well. If you come into a faculty position with no teaching experience and find yourself teaching three or more courses for the first time in your life, you are going to wind up:

1. Exhausted and miserable, staring enviously -- as I occasionally did during my first year of full-time teaching -- at the workers on the buildings-and-grounds crew, wishing desperately for a five-day-a-week job that you could leave at 5 p.m. and not think about until the next morning.
2. Learning your new trade on the backs of a year's worth of students, as you struggle through the tough initiation rites that every new teacher undergoes -- without the support of your graduate-school network of friends and mentors or the time to think very hard about what you're doing.

At the talk, I also offered a few tips about what graduate students in the sciences can do to gain teaching experience. One of those suggestions was to teach an occasional adjunct course at colleges or programs outside of the undergraduate division of your doctoral university.

But after the talk, another student pointed out to me that many graduate programs grant financing to students with the stipulation that they not have outside employment -- and that would include adjunct teaching.

Putting aside the justice of such stipulations, and my own history of ignoring the one that came along with my graduate support (I had a newborn child and a wife in her first years as an elementary-school teacher; if I hadn't had additional sources of income, we would have survived on crackers and Kool-Aid), this situation does seem to place a segment of the faculty-applicant pool in a bind familiar to job seekers in many sectors: You need experience to get a particular job, but you can't get the job without experience.

I have no easy solution to that dilemma. I can offer only a few suggestions, some for graduate students and one for their supervisors.

Faculty members and administrators at the research institutions that produce the majority of American Ph.D.'s need to better understand the realities of life at small colleges and community colleges and to provide more-accurate information and guidance to graduate students interested in careers at those institutions.

In my admittedly limited experience of talking to graduate students and their mentors at major research universities, I have been surprised to discover how little awareness many of them have of the world in which I live and breathe -- a world in which I teach seven courses a year, advise dozens of undergraduates (not to mention their clubs and organizations), and squeeze in my research in the odd moments of the day, or over breaks and summers.

That most faculty members at research universities have no glimpse of my world is no surprise. Most of those professors left a graduate program at a research university for a faculty position at a research university; that is the world of higher education they know. When it comes time to

advise their graduate students on the job market, they offer the wisdom that comes from their experience.

Unfortunately, their well-intentioned words of wisdom often don't make much sense when it comes time to write a job letter or put together a dossier or conduct an interview with a search committee at a college where you may find yourself teaching three or four courses a semester.

I am always surprised by the number of graduate students who approach me after a talk and confess that they really want a position teaching at a small college like mine but their adviser has either discouraged them from pursuing one or has been unable to offer much guidance. They come up to me because they are uncertain where else to turn.

Fortunately, many graduate-program administrators seem to have a clearer understanding of the problem than professors do and have established efforts like Preparing Future Faculty, which is designed to expose students to the kinds of academic responsibilities that faculty members face at a wide variety of institutions.

Given that the vast majority of faculty jobs in the United States are not at major research universities, I see no reason why every doctoral program in the country shouldn't offer this sort of professional exposure and guidance to its graduate students.

But none of that will help graduate students who are stuck in Ph.D. programs that don't offer such guidance yet who want a position at a teaching-oriented institution. Many of those students, as my questioner pointed out, will come from disciplines in the sciences.

All hope is not lost for those souls who find themselves caught between their professional desires and the restrictions of their graduate support or the biases of their mentors. I can offer three possible routes to help such students improve their job prospects at teaching-oriented colleges.

First, look for adjunct work at local colleges. That advice should be considered void for students whose graduate funding stipulates no outside work. I would never advise you to jeopardize your grant support. (Just between you and me, though, many graduate students -- and note that I am not condoning such behavior -- ignore such stipulations and pick up work teaching basic science courses at local colleges in their last year or two of graduate school.)

Second, consider taking a sabbatical replacement position at a teaching institution for your first position out of graduate school. While we would never hire a graduate student without teaching experience for a tenure-track job, we would hire a promising and interested Ph.D. for a replacement position, or even for full or half-time lecturer jobs. Then, if you decide you hate teaching, or it turns out that you do it rather badly, we can part ways without the complications of the tenure track getting in the way.

The teaching experience that you would get in such a position, even after a single year, would be more than enough to bolster your application at most teaching colleges.

Finally, consider taking a teaching postdoctoral position. Such posts offer the opportunity to teach as well as continue your graduate research, and can serve as an excellent springboard to faculty positions at teaching-oriented colleges. We have veterans of postdoctoral teaching positions on our faculty, and would definitely view candidates who have sought out such positions as having demonstrated a strong commitment to teaching. The Web site of the National Postdoctoral Association, has a good overview of those positions, and links to a number of programs.

In the end, the responsibility for helping graduate students become better prepared for academic positions outside of the major research universities lies with the graduate programs and their faculties. Without their help, you will remain at a disadvantage as a candidate for jobs at small colleges and community colleges -- a hard truth that many graduate programs could help to change.

*James M. Lang is an associate professor of English at Assumption College and the author of **On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching**, published this month by Harvard University Press.*