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# *Have You Chosen the Right Career?*

*Overview: Not everyone is suited to be a surgeon, a television talk-show host, or a professional golfer. And it follows that being highly intelligent or having the gift of facile speech does not ensure that a given individual will be a good teacher. When things are not going well, how is a novice educator to know whether he or she has chosen the right career? This chapter is written for new faculty who are having severe doubts about their careers and who need guidance in thinking through negative feedback or unhappiness with teaching at the college level.*

## ***Being Realistic***

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Teaching is enormously satisfying when things are going well—especially when you have bright, inquisitive minds hungry for instruction; when you are able to see the progress that an individual student or a whole class is making; when penetrating questions are asked and no one jumps up to leave after the bell rings; when students come by your office and ask for advice; and when, in preparing a lecture, you discover a little known fact or case that will become the basis for a paper that you want to write.

When you get back a good set of teaching evaluations or a colleague tells you that he or she has heard from students what a super job you are doing in the classroom, there will be no doubt in your mind that teaching is the right career for you. And the former

students who unexpectedly drop by to thank you, to say that you were their favorite teacher, will give you a dose of euphoria better than a box of chocolates on Valentine's Day. Treasure these memories.

Life, however, is composed of both ups and downs. There are going to be low spots in your career as a faculty member—go ahead and recognize that—prepare yourself for these. You can expect, for instance, that someday a hostile student will charge into your office and argue some minor point until you become angry yourself and don't handle the situation well; when a student will try to cheat on a test and then accuse you of lying; when it is Sunday and you will have a bad case of the flu and three piles of term papers to grade before you have to turn in final grades on Monday morning; when you've spent four hours preparing an exam only to have it stolen right off the secretary's desk; and when a student or a class evaluates you unfairly and says hurtful things.

There may be territorial and political battles within the department where you feel that you are torn between two powerful adversaries and must steer a course that allows you to walk down the middle without stepping into the minefields to the left or right. You will also be saddened when close friends do not get tenure despite the fact that they are excellent teachers or have a better publishing record than most of the individual members of the promotion and tenure committee. In short, you will experience a mixture of both highs and lows. There will be times when you feel that your destiny, your calling, is to be a damn good educator. And there will be occasions when you are sorely tempted to tell the department head what you *really* think of him or her and when all you want to do is to walk out of the classroom, throw the students' papers away, and apply for a job stocking shelves at Wal-Mart. Fortunately, these days will be relatively rare.

Teaching is a great vocation. Seldom is anyone looking over your shoulder telling you what to do or how to do it. There's no clock punching and there's few emergencies to handle. Best of all, teaching is not a singular craft, but is a profession composed of very different and discrete pursuits involving such pleasurable activities as reading (now tell the truth, isn't this one of your favorite things to do?); organizing, creating, and locating interesting material for lectures; preparing instructional materials (e.g., transparencies, handouts, homework assignments); delivering the lecture; serving

as a discussion facilitator, a cheerleader, a motivational speaker, and an entertainer; and advising not only in the academic area but also in the realm of roommates, lovers, parents, and vocational choices. And in many universities, that is only half the job. There's also writing professional articles, data analysis, doing lab work, and tracking down that elusive reference to complete a literature review. In short, there's something almost for everyone who is interested in intellectual matters.

Those who strongly favor one portion of the job more than another—for instance, who like conducting research better than classroom teaching—tend to gravitate toward niches where they can do just that. Even the worst part of being a faculty member—the drudgery of grading—typically doesn't consume all that much time, and instructors often find creative solutions to minimize the amount of time that it does take. There is an enormous amount of freedom within academe. With the right amount of self-discipline, you can get the onerous parts of the job done and out of the way, and still have the bulk of the time you want to work left over for activities that you find more enjoyable. So, when tasks that aren't fun or enjoyable are getting to you, just remember that usually these sorts of things don't constitute most of your job. Consider the things that you do like to do—and then try to find more time to do what's enjoyable.

## ***Have You Chosen the Right Career?***

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When your jokes and lectures fall flat and students are sleeping in your classroom, even the most enthusiastic educator can become discouraged. A bit of advice here: Don't generalize from a single negative experience, an unmotivated class, or even a single semester and conclude that you aren't cut out to be an educator. There are classes which, for whatever reasons, are more unruly or denser or less amenable to your form of instruction than others. Expect to run into some of these. Just one just class can make you feel that you are having a terrible semester. When things aren't going well, don't make hasty decisions. Don't resign on the spot, set your office on fire, or slap the student who has been trying to look down your blouse all semester.

To gain perspective, it might be helpful to talk with a friend or colleague you can trust. Explain the event or situation. Ask for

advice. Sometimes experienced faculty have wonderful suggestions for how to improve difficult situations. You may even want to invite a more experienced instructor to sit in with your class to observe the dynamics. Or you might wish to observe more seasoned instructors.

Negative experiences can also originate from a bad match of your skills and talents with what the department or college wants. If all you want to do is to teach Chaucer, but the dean wants you writing federal grants for money to combat adult illiteracy in the Aleutian islands, then there's a problem. In a situation like this, it's often helpful to try to estimate how long an unpleasant task might last. Your course of action will likely depend on whether the distasteful project is time limited to three or four weeks or if it is presented as your *major* responsibility for the foreseeable future.

It's possible to be unhappy in an academic setting for a lot of different reasons. For instance, you could feel dejected because of (1) separation from a loved one or family members, (2) physical isolation (e.g., an individual from the city takes a job in a small college located in a rural area), (3) problems with teaching assignments or course load, (4) inadequate pay or educational resources, or (5) the academic milieu (e.g., the department head is an absolute tyrant and an ignoramus to boot). Try to identify the source of your unhappiness. The solutions are very different if you are separated from a loved one because of appointments to different universities than if you are having a personality clash with a single student in your English 101 class.

If your unhappiness is not a temporary thing—that is, if it doesn't go away after several weeks—then this is one that can't be ignored. However, it doesn't necessarily mean that you should think about leaving the profession; instead, your dispiritedness might be directly attributable to the *place* where you are employed. In another college or university you may once again feel that you were destined to be an educator. And, if you discover that you aren't cut out to be a researcher, then you might want to consider moving from a research university to a smaller college or junior college.

Even the best teacher may have an “off” semester, but if you have received several semesters of bad teaching evaluations, then it is clear you are doing something incorrectly. It doesn't mean that you are not well suited for a career in teaching, but it is pointing to the need for you to get some help from someone more experienced.

If you get back student evaluations that are personally devastating, immediately get consultation from someone you trust. Get your mentor or department chair actively involved. Have an experienced faculty member sit in with your classes and make observations. Sawyer, Prichard, and Hostetler (1992) stated, “It is almost impossible to cover up poor teaching. Poor research can be destroyed, and few will know about it. No so for the public performance that teaching entails” (p. 151).

In a set of essays entitled *The Chalk Dust Collection*, Fisch (1996) has listed a set of key questions that he says teachers should reflect on because they will result in better teaching. But these questions can also be used to help those struggling with a decision about whether to leave teaching. An abbreviated listing of some of his pertinent questions are as follows:

1. *What activities in teaching give me the greatest satisfaction? What causes me to come away from a class feeling really high?*
2. *What do I do that seems to produce good response in students—not just positive comments but eager attention, intelligent questions, and desire to engage the material?*
3. *What modifications can I make in my teaching in order to increase the frequency of the wonderful moments referred to above?*
4. *Why did I decide to go into teaching? How can I work to enhance the attainment of the goals implied in that choice?*
5. *If I had the freedom to spend the next day doing exactly what I want (without regard to schedule, commitments, and responsibilities), what would I do?*
6. *In what personal and professional activities would I like to be engaged five years from now? (pp. 158–159)*

Only you know what you want to accomplish in life. If you have worked hard to get where you are but now are ready to quit in disgust, give yourself some time to gather additional information, to consult with others, to reflect and examine your options, as well as to look at what you can do and what you can do *differently*. You are not alone. A wonderful thing about being in academia is that there are so many resources available to us, ranging from the library and the instructional development center, to supportive colleagues, to

talented students. If you are having difficulty with your teaching, take advantage of the intellectual riches around you; tackle it as though it were a dissertation topic—do the necessary research to get to the source of the problem.

Teaching is a fine and noble profession, and if you are dedicated to the notion of teaching, there *is* a place for you. Your particular venue may, however, reside in a different place than where you currently are; perhaps you are better suited to be an instructor in a community college instead of a Research 1 institute. Only you know the depth of your desire to teach. This was how Palmer (1998) phrased it: “I am a teacher at heart, and there are moments in the classroom when I can hardly hold the joy. When my students and I discover uncharted territory to explore, when the pathway out of a thicket opens up before us, when our experience is illumined by the lightning-life of the mind—then teaching is the finest work I know” (p. 1). If this is how you feel, then you should follow your passion, even though there may be small setbacks and obstacles in your path.

Interestingly, this is what Palmer (1998) wrote just one paragraph later:

*But at other moments, the classroom is so lifeless or painful or confused—and I am so powerless to do anything about it—that my claim to be a teacher seems a transparent sham. Then the enemy is everywhere: in those students from some alien planet, in that subject I thought I knew, and in the personal pathology that keeps me earning my living this way. What a fool I was to imagine that I had mastered this occult art—harder to divine than tea leaves and impossible for mortals to do even passably well! (p. 1)*

Experienced faculty know that the sailing is not always smooth, that there will be good days and bad days, and even good classes and good semesters as well as bad ones. Don’t capitulate too soon. As Parker’s book on the craft of teaching describes time and again, even those who know what they are doing are often uncertain and anxious and don’t have a clue at the beginning if it is going to all work out.

Some actual data may be of assistance in helping you to evaluate any unhappiness with teaching. According to a poll of 1,500

full-time faculty members both at two- and four-year institutions conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, over 90 percent expressed a clear satisfaction with their career choice; 87 percent would definitely (63 percent) or probably (24 percent) pursue a career in higher education again if they were to begin their professional careers anew. Although the percentage of educators who would choose careers in education fluctuates somewhat, it does so narrowly across age, gender, race/ethnicity, academic rank, and institution type. However, about 40 percent of faculty respondents reported that they had considered a career change. Sources of dissatisfaction mentioned most frequently were displeasure with the financial compensation; personal issues, such as new opportunities in outside fields, family considerations, and feeling burned out or wanting a new challenge; and frustration with the “system” <[www.norc.uchicago.edu/online/tiaa-fin.pdf](http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/online/tiaa-fin.pdf)>.

As you were inspired by the excellent teachers whom you encountered, so you, too, will encourage and stimulate students to become future educators. You probably won’t get a gaggle of students waiting for you after the final exam, bubbling and gushing eager adorations. Don’t be disappointed; you can’t really expect that. You may, however, find that a student or two have penned petite little notes, “Thanks, Dr. Miller—I really enjoyed this course!” on the bottom of their exams or course evaluation forms. Maybe a former student will stop by someday and want to chat. Or perhaps a student might bake you some cookies or send a small gift over when your new son is born. Teachers often don’t get a lot more dramatic evidence than that of a job well done. Students seldom go out of their way to show appreciation to their instructors. But at some point in your career, you’ll develop a quiet confidence that you *are* a good teacher, despite the fact that students don’t push and shove to get into your classes; eventually, you’ll come to terms with your shortcomings as well.

To paraphrase the British educator and Greek scholar Benjamin Jowett, to teach someone how to learn to think independently is perhaps the greatest service that one can ever do for another. Excellent teachers have always been and will always be needed by society. If you have a particular craving to teach, then you will likely have a very rich and interesting life. Congratulations on having made the right vocational decision!

## ***References and Resources***

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- Fisch, L. (1996). *The chalk dust collection: Thoughts and reflections on teaching in colleges and universities*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.
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