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Opportunities for Academic Psychologists as Instructors in
Post-Secondary Education

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Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate the opportunities as instructors in Post-Secondary Education for those with graduate level training in Academic Psychology. The traditional career path of teaching at a college, university, or community college is investigated. An information interview was conducted as part of this paper, and the results will be presented.

Opportunities for Academic Psychologists as
Instructors in Post-Secondary Education

For psychologists in general, a basic understanding of what it means to be an instructor in post-secondary education is important. According to The Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH, 2002), “Educational institutions employed about 4 out of 10 salaried psychologists in positions other than teaching, such as counseling, testing, research, and administration” (OOH, Legal and Social Science Occupations, p. 16). “In addition to the jobs described above, many psychologists held faculty positions at colleges and universities” (OOH, Legal and Social Science Occupations, p. 16).

One can infer, then, that it is even more important to an Academic Psychologist – whose entire emphasis is on understanding the educational process in general, and often adult education in specific. An understanding of adult education and how higher education fits would seem to be mandatory for anyone who desires to be an Academic Psychologist.

The emphasis of a professor’s duties varies, not only from university to university, but within the university as well. The Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) of the University of Michigan reports that less than half of professors at various levels at the University of Michigan consider teaching and advising students to be their “primary academic role”, and only 43% of the faculty “Agrees or strongly agrees that to secure tenure, one must be a good teacher (CRLT, tables 1 & 2). Yet the first line of the report states “The University of Michigan is a large, complex research university with strong commitment to teaching” (Cook et. al.).

These results correlate strongly with what I was told by Dr. Paul Bartoli of East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania (ESU). According to Dr. Bartoli (personal

communication, May 31, 2002) the nature of the university is a primary consideration in the importance of that university. A Research university, for instance, would place more importance on obtaining research grant money, whereas ESU is well known as a teaching university and consequently places a great deal of emphasis on teaching.

At ESU, the duties of a full time professor in the Psychology department are broken down into approximately 60% teaching, 20% – 30% academic advisement, 10% -15% research, and 5% community service. ESU is also distinguished in that it wishes to create scholar-practitioners of all of its' students, and thus emphasizes undergraduate research in psychology. (ESU does not have a graduate psychology program). While the quality of this research is different than that of a graduate student, it is nonetheless significant enough that undergraduate research papers are often presented at area psychology conferences.

The occupation is extremely competitive as well. According to Dr. Bartoli (personal communication, May 31, 2002) there are often large numbers of candidates that meet the minimum qualifications. In the “search and screen” committee that he sat on there were between 80 and 250 fully qualified candidates. With so much competition, the candidate is well advised to make their application stand out enough that the committee recommends an interview.

One thing that Dr. Bartoli (personal communication, May 31, 2002) recommended was to get involved in at least three professional organizations. He mentioned getting involved in a specialty section of the American Psychology Association (APA), and regional organizations as well as other recognized professional bodies.

Other qualifications such as a masters degree in a disparate field, graduate certificates, and continuing education units are good ways to make your application stand

out. He also mentioned contacts in your specialization, attending conferences, providing extra references, and any relevant extra training. For example, if my specialization was “Martial Arts and Psychology” having an advanced certification in one or more martial arts would add to the application. Having a reference from a researcher in the field would also stand out. Also, the ability to deliver external courses, such as at a business site, would be considered a plus.

The most important thing, according to Dr. Bartoli (personal communication, May 31, 2002) is to be creative. “Identify their need and bring a skill set to match” (personal communication with Dr. Paul Bartoli, May 31, 2002). If, for example, the applicant has never taught a course that is identified in the advertisement, then they should provide ample evidence of the ability to teach that course.

Still, most psychologists should expect to teach psychology as adjunct (part time) faculty before they can hope to gain employment as a full time instructor. According to Dr. Bartoli (personal communication, May 31, 2002) many candidates have experience as adjunct faculty, and this teaching experience is especially important for schools, such as ESU, that foremost value the instructor’s capability to teach.

Good news for Capella students is that the reputation of the candidate’s school and the candidates GPA matter very little in the selection process at teaching oriented schools such as ESU. While the professor is expected to be a scholar-practitioner, and as such is expected to attend conferences, read literature in his or her field, and do some research, the ability to draw grant money or do innovative research is not as important as the quality of undergraduate students the instructor is capable of producing. Dr. Bartoli, (personal communication, May 31, 2002), whose Ph.D. comes from Walden University (a non-traditional, fully accredited university) notes that while having a degree from a non-

traditional school is still somewhat controversial, there are those who consider it an advantage. The Dean of the college, for instance, may be considering offering online courses and would be highly interested in the professor's experience and ability to assist in delivery of the online course.

Higher education is one of the few industries where mobility is still at the pre-information age levels. According to Dr. Bartoli (personal communication, May 31, 2002) it takes five years to gain "tenure" at most universities, and if a professor decides to move on it will take another five years to invest themselves into the new system. Thus, there is a tendency to stay in one place for the entire career. There are some universities, however, that are going to a new approach involving contracts so this may also be changing. He also noted that the business model for traditional universities might be changing with the continuing development of online and non-traditional modes of delivery.

Advancement requirements are specified in the contract that the instructor is hired under. According to Dr. Bartoli, (personal communication, May 31, 2002), the first five years at ESU are filled with peer reviews where other professors sit in one of the professors classes and evaluate the their effectiveness. Afterwards this process slows down until the professor applies for a promotion, at which point the cycle intensifies again. Student evaluations are also important, and are included in the professor's application, both for tenure and promotion.

At ESU, every professor is required to teach four courses and has the option of teaching more. Courses are assigned based on seniority, with the most senior faculty getting the first choice of which class they wish to teach. They then rotate through the rest of the faculty by seniority. The full time faculty also has the opportunity to teach extra

courses (for extra compensation) if they so desire. Once all full time faculty are satisfied with their teaching load, the university offers courses to the adjunct faculty.

Community service and student advisement are also important to faculty at ESU (personal communication with Dr. Paul Bartoli, May 31, 2002). A professor may be expected to teach an evening class at the local community center, or a weekend seminar at a local charity. Student advisement is generally taken care of through “office hours” – a standard and public schedule of when any student may contact that professor.

Another requirement is to get involved in academic committees. Dr. Bartoli (personal communication, May 31, 2002) states that while committee involvement is not mandatory, it is “good protocol”. One should expect to be involved in at least three committees during any given term.

According to Dr. Bartoli (personal communication, May 31, 2002), the toughest part about being a professor is the disproportionate nature of the work. During exam week, for instance, he may be spending a lot of time grading exams whereas during most weeks he only lectures and has office hours.

In all, Dr. Bartoli finds the experience “deeply rewarding” (personal communication, May 31, 2002) in spite of the disproportionate nature of the work. He finds that the most gratifying part of being a psychology professor is watching his students enjoying themselves, and sparking interest in psychology.

My conclusion is that instruction in higher education is a tough but rewarding profession. The competition is fierce, and sometimes the hours can be long. But the reward of satisfaction can be tremendous.

I discovered this during my one term as adjunct faculty teaching computer science. There is nothing quite like the satisfaction of watching a creative spark ignite in a student's eyes. That is what teaching is all about.

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