



Life at a Teaching University

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ABSTRACT

Many new political science faculty at teaching universities are recent PhD recipients, and are coming to these institutions from research-oriented universities. There are considerable differences between the training for graduate students received at research universities and the expectations for faculty at teaching universities. This essay reflects on the author's first year at a teaching university and offers six themes that may assist other new faculty in the transition from life as a graduate student at a research institution to life as an assistant professor at a teaching university.

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Like many PhD students, I received my doctorate from a research-oriented university. Yet I received my first job at what is often called a “teaching university.”¹ The transition to my first job showed how different life as an academic is at this type of institution compared to the way I was trained and the different expectations that accompanied my new life. In what follows, I will share some of what I learned along the way with the goal of easing the transition from being a graduate student at a research institution to becoming an Assistant Professor at a teaching university for future new hires.

The Political Science Department at the University of Texas, where I received my PhD, had a certain rhythm of life. Most weeks during the semester included a guest speaker of some sort, often a professor from another university who shared her work with the political science faculty and graduate students. The faculty created research groups that regularly met to discuss research.

Many of the faculty were passionate about teaching, but teaching was often less of a priority than conducting research. Many of these faculty lamented that their teaching was not emphasized and prioritized more, but the institutional incentives at the University of Texas preclude tenure-track faculty from putting too much time into it. Student evaluations do matter for tenure decisions, it seems, but other metrics, such as research productivity, matter just as much if not more.

The incentive structure of research-oriented universities was reflected in our training. We spent countless hours writing research design papers that could potentially be turned into full-fledged research projects. Our professors grilled us on how we posed our research questions, whether our theories were coherent, and whether our empirical approach was sufficient to answer the research question.

Our training as instructors mainly came from serving as teaching assistants, where the responsibilities consisted of attending classes, grading assignments and exams, and occasionally lecturing. We took a course on teaching at the university level, and I, like

many of my colleagues, led discussion sections for a lecture course and eventually taught a course of my own. 55

Despite these helpful opportunities, our training was directed essentially to replicating our institution: The University of Texas trained us to become the sorts of researchers that the University of Texas itself values.

Yet many new PhD recipients will not land jobs at institutions with the same institutional incentives as the ones that trained them. One reason for this is that there are more political science PhDs produced each year than there are job openings at research-focused institutions. According to the National Science Foundation (2016), 859 political science PhDs were conferred in 2015. Yet there are only 115 universities categorized as R1 or research universities with the highest research activity as measured by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2015). Each of the R1 universities would need to offer an average of seven openings for each new PhD to receive a position, which is clearly infeasible. 60 65

The oversupply of job market candidates with a limited number of openings creates a very competitive market for tenure-track positions, and not only for R1 university positions. According to the American Political Science Association (APSA), only 31.9% of all job market candidates received tenure-track job offers in 2015–2016 (2017). The competition for tenure-track jobs leads political science job applicants to apply to a wide range of academic institutions, including teaching universities, and will often accept positions at institutions quite different from the universities where they received their PhD. 70 75

The result is that a PhD graduate from a research institution, newly hired at a teaching university, will often have to learn the job of a teaching professor “on the fly,” as it were. Life at a teaching university is quite different in terms of the incentives, challenges with time management, expectations from the administration, and even the relationship with students, from life at a research university as I observed it at the University of Texas and experienced it through my graduate training. The requirements for being a professor go beyond one’s skills as a researcher, and in light of this some universities have called for more training of PhD students to increase their teaching effectiveness (Patel 2017). 80

Luckily, just as you can learn how to become a researcher, you can also learn the skills needed to flourish at a teaching university. So, in what follows, I hope to provide some thoughts on how a recent political science PhD graduate and/or an incoming Assistant Professor should approach their next chapter in life as a professor in a teaching university. The purpose here is not to provide a comprehensive overview of, say, how to get tenure (after all, I have not yet earned it). Nor is it a comprehensive guide to success at a teaching university. Instead, the purpose here is to map out some of the differences between life as graduate student at a research institution versus life as an assistant professor at a teaching-oriented institution. 85 90

1. *Your social and institutional standing has just changed substantially.* After years of life as a graduate student, your life has now entered a new chapter. Part of the change of transitioning from a PhD student to a Political Science Professor is social: Whereas just a few months prior you may have been a graduate student who teaches undergraduate students, you are now categorized by students as a faculty member and as such in a position of responsibility for such tasks as mentoring, assigning final grades, and serving as the authority in the classroom. Students may take an unexpected interest in discerning your “political views” as an Assistant Professor of Political Science. You may find people 95 100

whom you have just met asking your opinion on a political subject, however remote from your area of expertise, or your political affiliation.

The change is also institutional: As a new assistant professor, you are now part of the institution and expected to contribute to it through tasks like participation in shared governance, committee work, and development of the curriculum. These responsibilities go considerably beyond the institutional expectations of graduate students, which largely consist of producing research and in some cases teaching classes or serving as teaching assistants.

2. *Time management is increasingly a challenge.* Teaching and preparing to teach a class takes time. Yet teaching universities may ask their faculty to teach as many as four to five classes a semester, or more. Spending 3 to 4 hours to prepare for a single lecture, as I used to do when I taught my first class, is no longer possible. Now on the one hand that is a good thing, because I (like many other graduate instructors) overprepared my first classes and so tried to cover too much material in each course session. Now, I try to limit my class preparation time to 2 hours at the maximum for each course session, and I reach that maximum only for courses with which I am less familiar. For courses that I am more comfortable with, I keep my course preparation down to about half an hour.

One strategy to limit course preparation time is to slow down in the classroom. A temptation for new professors is to try to cram more and more material into each class session. Rather than emphasizing breadth, you can emphasize the depth with which the material is covered (Conley 2015). Focus more on the concepts and less on the conveying of facts. The emphasis in the classroom should be less about teaching the material and more on student learning and comprehension (Barr and Tagg 1995), and slowing down can facilitate this shift in emphasis.

In my case, my teaching load is 27 credit hours per academic year. In my first year, I had to prepare five new courses that I had not previously taught, in addition to starting and recruiting students for a Model Arab League club as part of the expectation for my position. I also taught a first-year seminar course.

To help prepare these courses, my colleagues generously provided syllabi from previous courses from which I drew ideas. I accessed the APSA Syllabi Project,² which has a sizeable number of syllabi that are helpful for drawing ideas and inspiration in designing new courses and assignments. While careful not to depend too heavily on lecturing, in some cases I used textbooks that came with lectures slides that accompanied the text. I also spent some time each day to find relevant current events that can be used to illustrate a concept or introduce a debate surrounding an issue.

3. *You have considerable autonomy, but you do have people to whom you are responsible.* As a Professor, I love the independence I have in my work. No one is leaning over my shoulder to make sure that I am getting my work done.³ If I decide to leave the office a little early one day to work from home, no one asks twice.

However, you do have people to whom you are responsible. The first group is the students. As a Political Science Professor at a teaching university, I only get to keep my job if students are taking my courses. Attending to the needs of students has to be a high priority. You will be evaluated on how you manage relations with students. Being available and accessible to students is a good idea, such as showing up for office hours on-time and responding to student emails in a timely manner. However, be prepared to set reasonable limits on your availability via email, such as not responding to emails after a certain hour in

the evening or on weekends. Furthermore, managing relations with students does not mean being “easy” or readily giving out high grades. Instead, set clear expectations and standards that push your students to excel.

In addition to managing relations with students, you will have a lead professor for your department, a department or division chair, a dean, provost, and possibly a vice-president for academic affairs with whom you will need to stay on good terms. Aside from your departmental colleagues and chair, these people are not likely to be political scientists. The key to staying on good terms with these people is to do your job well, which largely (though not exclusively) will involve staying on good terms with your students.

4. *Collegiality cannot be overrated.* Your reputation matters. So, get along with people. Be the sort of colleague for others that you would like for yourself. Whereas an advanced graduate student has some sort of seniority with newer graduate students, remember that as the new Assistant Professor, you are now at the bottom of a new totem pole,⁴ as it were. Collegiality, through actions such as showing respect, working collaboratively, and assuming responsibility, can go a long way to building relationships with your new peers (Cipriano 2013).

Of course, collegiality also matters as a graduate student. The difference is that a new Assistant Professor of Political Science faces is likely to interact with a diverse group of faculty from other departments and staff members who may not understand political science as a discipline. Part of maintaining collegiality with this broader group of people includes understanding the various institutional priorities and interests of the different schools, departments, and administrative offices of the university.

5. *Enrollment numbers shape your future.* Teaching universities, especially private ones, are mostly funded by student tuition, along with whatever funds they extract from their endowment, donations from wealthy alumni, and grants. Student enrollments therefore dictate the budget, and an increase in enrollment is therefore as much cause for celebration as a decrease in enrollment is cause for concern. When the level of incoming students is unexpectedly high, this means that there is space in the budget for extra expenses. When the level of incoming students is unexpectedly low, that means cuts in the budget have to be made.

This is true at the university as well as the department levels: A decline in majors for your department is a worrisome sign and can bring new pressures to bear to increase the number of majors or risk losing funding and even faculty positions. At the extreme end, a sufficient drop in enrollments can lead to the termination of a department. On the other hand, a sufficient increase in enrollments may result in new funding or even a new hire.⁵

Finally, as a Political Science Professor at a teaching university, you will be expected to recruit students into your political science major. Thus life as a Political Science Professor at a teaching university is rather entrepreneurial: You have to sell the major and the benefits that ensue from investing in political science as a field of study. It also makes life at a teaching university unexpectedly competitive: The pool of potential candidates is largely fixed in a given academic year, while each department has the incentive to increase the number of their majors. Faculty can be resentful if they lose too many majors to faculty in another department.

6. *“They don’t care what you know; they want to know you care.”*⁶ This is the best piece of advice I have received on how to get along with students. Students are by and large not impressed by a large vocabulary and expansive knowledge. Instead, they want to know that you care about their academic progress. If they know you care, they will also be more motivated to pay attention to what you have to tell them and read the materials

assigned. Showing that you care therefore helps their education as well (Teven and McCroskey 1997).

In addition to showing care about their learning, building trust is a key aspect to the student-professor relationship (Brookfield 1990, 163–177). Having a foundation of trust dramatically expands the possibilities of what can be accomplished in the classroom. You can explore more difficult subjects if there is a foundation of trust. You can push the students on their ideas and arguments if they know you ultimately are for them, and not against them. And you and your students will both enjoy your classes if a mutual foundation of trust has been established.

Establishing trust and care can assist in discussing contemporary controversial issues in American and global politics. For example, I taught a course on global human rights that included a section on the rights of refugees and immigrants. I had scheduled this section later in the semester. As it turned out, my students had strongly held and in some cases differing opinions regarding immigration policy. Yet because we had explored other, less-controversial issues earlier in the semester and established a basis for trust through our treatment of those topics, our discussion on immigration was more forthcoming than it might have been if we had not established that foundation for dialogue.

The key to building trust is to know yourself (Palmer 2010), know your students, and model the respect that you want them to show to you.

Conclusion

I firmly believe that a teaching university can offer a rewarding career for a political scientist where someone can introduce new students to the discipline while also finding ways to contribute to the production of knowledge. We get to introduce students to content and debates that are of vital importance to American and global politics. The higher teaching requirements often result in a more diverse course rotation, with some classes recurring every few years. One benefit of having a diverse course rotation is you get to stay current on a broad array of subjects and debates. A lowered research expectation may allow you to invest more in having a civic impact and in political science scholarship that appeals to a broader audience.

You also get to know your students to an extent that is not always possible at larger universities; you get the satisfaction of observing the development and advancement of your students' political acumen, and you get to see the fruits of that labor as they move on to their careers. And, just as for many of us, we would not be where we are today without someone choosing to invest in and mentor us, you have the opportunity to be a mentor for others and to advise students on their educational and career paths. The satisfaction that comes from those relationships can be just as great as and even greater than the satisfaction that comes from research-related accolades.

There is certainly a transition from the rhythm of life as a graduate student at a research university to the rhythm of life as an Assistant Professor at a teaching university. Yet the transition is manageable, and hopefully the points made above will assist the transition for future hires.

Notes

1. By “teaching university” I mean an institution of higher education in which the expectations for faculty include higher teaching loads and relatively low expectations for scholarship. By “research

- university” I am an institution of higher education in which faculty are evaluated largely on their research productivity and have relatively low teaching expectations.
2. APSA Syllabi Project, accessed here: <http://www.apsanet.org/RESOURCES/For-Faculty/Syllabi-in-Political-Science/Online-Syllabi-Collections>, on August 7, 2017. 240
 3. My experience is not unique. One study of time diaries of faculty suggests that 57% of academic work is done alone (Ziker 2014).
 4. I owe this observation to Scott Wolford.
 5. Of course, political science departments vary in size across teaching universities, just as teaching universities vary in size from a few hundred to tens of thousands of students. Therefore, the sensitivity of the department and university to enrollment declines and increases is relative to the size of the department and university. 245
 6. I owe this observation to Damon Eubank.

Notes on contributor 250

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