

## So You Think You Want To Teach In College: Some Things To Consider Prior To Making Your Decision

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### Abstract

While examining data from a previous qualitative study focusing on 11 senior health educators employed by research-intensive universities, we uncovered a variety of factors that made important contributions to their overall job satisfaction. Although salary (and benefits) are typically highly ranked when making a career decision, this article condensed a variety of responses from our senior faculty into six considerations which help to identify an 'optimal fit' work setting. Some, or all of these considerations are in addition to the universal 'love of teaching' expressed by all of our subjects. The result has been health education careers greatly influenced or pleasantly enhanced by the overall quality of personal as well as professional lives.

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One of the most important decisions facing graduates of doctoral programs is whether or not to pursue a career in teaching. Certainly, teaching is a rewarding career and the majority of graduates in health education programs seek careers in academia. Once a decision is made to pursue a career in teaching, an additional consideration is the type of institution in which to seek employment. While conducting a qualitative study on reinvestment strategies of 11 senior faculty in health education (Poczwadowski, Grosshans, & Trunnell, 2003), we uncovered a wealth of information about how senior faculty progressed through their careers, finally settling into the positions they currently hold. The majority of these senior professors had moved at least once in their career, and several had taught at more than two universities. The participants' had significant teaching experience ranging from 20-33 cumulative years in the classroom. Participants averaged 19 years in their current position and all taught at institutions that offered three degrees (BS, MS, PhD) in health education.

When retracing career paths with these senior faculty, inevitably the topic of career moves

came up. A commonly accepted idiom in any profession, which also holds true in higher education, is that a move will result in a faster salary increase than remaining at the same institution. However, factors other than pay entered into decisions to move on or remain in their current positions. Achieving "joy in the workplace" due to effective matching of personal and professional preferences was important to all participants interviewed.

Although there is a plethora of information in professional and lay literature, and in campus placement centers focusing on the interview process and how best to prepare for your first job (Heiberger & Vick, 2001; Kahan, 2000), this paper goes beyond that information. Our purpose is to examine factors - beyond the love of teaching - that our senior health educators identified as reasons for their joy and satisfaction with their current positions. This information, organized into six categories, is supplemented with empirical observations gleaned from years of talking with former students who moved into faculty ranks. Some of the factors may not be discernable from campus interview questions, but rather they involve a

'sense of fit,' which junior faculty should consider as important as their salary. It is the hope of the authors that this information will help recent doctoral graduates approach important career decisions in a systematic fashion.

### **1. Differences in University Organization/Structure**

Arguably, the most important structural question for recent doctoral graduates in health education is how the primary unit of employment functions. Is health education an independent department/division, with its own administrator, its own budget, and its own faculty governance (i.e., a Department of Health Promotion and Education)? If this is the case, then that department probably has a more distinct sense of autonomy related to curriculum, goals, budget, etc. In this structure, department politics, if any, will most likely focus on promoting preferred interest areas within health education.

An alternative structure is that health education is located within a multi-unit department, such as a Department of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation. Health education may have program status, and/or a program director, depending upon the number of faculty numbers and their expertise. This structure may have an administrator from a discipline other than health education, which becomes important when major issues are voted upon and health educators are in the minority. In this structure, department goals/objectives will blend the interests of all the units.

Another important factor to consider when examining departmental structure is who has input into promotion, retention, and tenure decisions. Faculty outside of health education may be unfamiliar with health education journals and their level of quality. Therefore, when tenure and promotion decisions are made, faculty outside of health promotion may not rank journal quality (or presentations, poster sessions, or professional service responsibilities) as high as they would if individuals published in journals with which they were more familiar.

Finally, how is the department funded? In recent years, many universities have adopted the 'business model' of funding their departments and programs. There may be variations of the model, but one very important factor is that funding is based on the number of students taught by a unit. Tuition is the primary source of funding for colleges, so the more students enrolled, the more money flows. This type of situation means that class enrollments are critical. Lower level classes 'filled to the gills' may pay for smaller higher level classes, or all classes may have to be filled to justify their existence in the curriculum.

### **2. Faculty Profile**

Equally important to departmental structure is the make-up of the faculty. Levels of faculty experience can make a huge difference in terms of "fit" and feelings of faculty collegiality. The make-up of a department varies, from having a faculty that is primarily senior, primarily junior, or a representative group of junior, mid-career, and senior faculty. Each situation has its own unique traits. Some traits are positive and some are negative. Since positive situations usually have minimal problems, potentially negative repercussions of each scenario will be presented.

If you are one of only a few junior faculty among primarily older faculty, then many senior faculty may be set in their ways. They typically have expectations for conducting their daily teaching routines, i.e., exercising over the noon hour, leaving each day at a set time, coffee with colleagues at a set day/time. Also older faculty may expect to teach preferred class content at preferred times on preferred days. Some older faculty take on the aura of being self-employed. Changing routines or level of contribution will be difficult. Therefore, junior faculty may be assigned less-preferable classes at less-preferable times scattered throughout the week. Although it is sometimes counter-productive to their research goals, junior faculty may be appointed to time-intensive committees, or designated as sponsors of student groups. Some may even carry the bulk of graduate supervisory committees or undergraduate advising. A last consideration for junior faculty choosing employment in departments dominated with

senior faculty is that many senior faculty have well-established personal lives. Therefore, any 'TGIF-type' of socializing with faculty might be unlikely.

If you are hired into a primarily junior faculty, then the guidance and wisdom of older faculty will be missed. Amazingly, quite a few expectations or rules of conduct are unwritten, and junior faculty may impede their own progress by unintentionally committing a faux pas. A junior faculty will lack the historical institutional perspective. Therefore, great ideas from the perspective of junior faculty, may be denied due to an unintentional affront to those who have to approve these requests. Junior faculty may be more likely to socialize with each other, and some may socialize with students--especially at the graduate level. A word of caution is warranted in this situation because although most situations are handled appropriately, personal conflicts that arise between faculty members and/or faculty and students are filled with disagreeable consequences.

A third type of faculty make-up is a balanced grouping of junior and senior faculty. This is a positive situation if members of the faculty respect each other and their opinions. Potentially different perspectives, caused by disparities in experience and age, may promote two opposing views on most issues, with each age group supporting their own view. Sometimes splinter groups develop along interest lines. Fortunately, many mid career faculty inadvertently serve as a bridge between the junior and senior faculty. They can still remember what it was like to have junior status, yet they are more aware of, and are closing in on the advantages of being senior faculty. Ideally junior faculty are energetic, enthusiastic, full of ideas, and competent in complex technical skills. Senior faculty who have sustained their love of teaching and are professionally motivated, are valued for their wisdom and guidance as well as their extended network of campus and professional contacts. Socializing may follow differences in age and experience, although other things such as recreational, cultural, or academic interests can bring groups together.

### **3. Campus Size and Make Up of Student Body**

A third factor to consider when choosing a career setting is campus size and the composition of the student body. A small campus is similar to a small town. Almost everyone knows everybody else. That can either be comforting or suffocating. It is fun to recognize students around town — unless your hair is in curlers or you're wearing your jeans with more holes than Swiss cheese. Usually small campuses offer one or possibly two degrees (BS/MS). This typically means an increased teaching load, and more contact with students--simply because class size and campus environments are smaller. There may also be more frequent contact among faculty from different areas.

On the other hand, a large campus may be overwhelming or exhilarating. Large campuses can be very friendly, but usually faculty need to work hard to encourage students to get involved with department or social groups. Programs on larger campuses usually offer at least one graduate degree, and that typically means an older student body, and arguably increased intellectual stimulation due to research projects undertaken. Faculties and departments tend to be more insular on large campuses simply because the daily routine of conducting the department business, such as teaching, research, committee meetings, can be done with minimal contact with other units.

Another factor that will influence your collegiate experience is the make-up of the student body. Some campuses enroll primarily commuter students while others are geographically suited for residential students. Commuter students rarely hang around after their last class, and many will not return to campus for late afternoon classes or student meetings (e.g., Eta Sigma Gamma). To the contrary, residential students living in dorms may be more readily available in late afternoons and on weekends for research projects, sports, recreation, or extra-curricular activities.

The big question to ask yourself is - in which setting will you thrive? If you take a position in

a large, research-oriented university that is not satisfying, moving to a smaller campus is quite possible. However, if you want to move from a small campus to a larger campus, and you have not established a research/grant record, then it is more difficult to make a change.

#### **4. PhD or “ABD”**

Another factor worth considering is whether to leave your doctoral granting institution prior to receiving your degree (ABD- All But Dissertation), or foregoing a year of teaching to finish your degree. The most immediate disadvantage of leaving your studies before completion of your doctoral degree is the potential for a lower rank and a reduced salary. A second disadvantage is the nagging need to complete your dissertation within the promised time period, usually within the first year of employment. Unfortunately, it is difficult for junior faculty to complete their dissertation while “learning the ropes” of a new institution, completing new class preparations, designing and grading exams and assignments, and generally adjusting to life on a new campus. Furthermore, job responsibilities in any new setting are usually underestimated. Large blocks of time required for serious writing are difficult to reserve when job responsibilities take priority. Once job-related tasks are completed, remaining free time is usually devoted to renewing one’s mental health. If you graduate and take a position ‘ABD’ without completing your dissertation in the prerequisite time period, future pay raises, promotions, and career moves may be jeopardized.

#### **5. Public vs. Private Universities**

A fifth consideration when deciding upon a career setting is whether to work at a public or private university or college. There are a surprising number of colleges and universities that are privately funded. For example, the Catholics support the University of Notre Dame, Methodists supports Southern Methodist University, the Seventh Day Adventists support Loma Linda University, a foundation supports Duke University, and the Church of Latter Day Saints supports Brigham Young University. Depending upon who is doing the funding, there may be restrictions on what can be taught or

specific criteria for student and faculty dress and/or behavior. Since health education content has the potential to be controversial (e.g., abortion, contraception), restrictions may be more noticeable in this area than in teaching mathematics or history.

Another consideration that is unique to private universities and colleges is that salary information is not readily available and open to the public. This can be positive in that faculty will be less aware of salary differentials, and thus less likely to squabble over salary differentials and raises. At public colleges and universities, salary information is available to the public. Ideally, public access to this information should ensure that factors such as discipline, gender, and sexual orientation will not negatively impact salary. Unfortunately, in reality, it can be a source of faculty disagreements.

Publicly funded universities are partially funded by U.S. citizens who contribute money for personnel and non-personnel budgets. Because public institutions are typically larger and more diverse, they may be more open to differences in thought and behavior. However, they may also be subject to increased public scrutiny. The public, because they pay taxes to fund higher education, may hold faculty more accountable for the education received.

#### **6. Meshing Personal Life with Professional Life**

The last factor to consider when deciding upon a career setting is how effortlessly you can mesh your personal and professional life. On the personal side, it is important to consider your life away from campus. For instance, if you have a spouse/partner to consider, the location should be satisfactory to both you and your partner. Empirical observations have revealed that when one spouse/partner has completed his/her degree, the other spouse may now want to do the same. Therefore, any potential job setting should offer the desired major of the spouse or partner. Alternately, if the spouse or partner already has an advanced degree, employment opportunities (including partner placements) should be considered.

Another question to ask is ‘what do you enjoy doing?’ Aside from work, what hobbies, interests, avocations do you have? If you like being active (e.g., hiking, biking, camping, running, golfing, tennis), make sure your chosen location has recreational opportunities nearby. If you have cultural interests such as dance, theater, opera, symphony, make sure your setting has those opportunities. Moving to a different part of the country may reveal interests that have yet to be tapped due to a prior lack of access or availability.

These personal choices can be endless; big city vs. small town, rural vs. suburban, warm versus seasonal climate, mountains vs. prairie, or coast vs. inland. The importance of this category is that having a quality personal life is a critical necessity for dealing with the stresses and pressures of work. It is also possible that a quality work environment can provide strength for dealing with stresses in your personal life. As one senior faculty participant related, “My wife and I both grew up in a big city. The first job opportunity after graduation was in a large university in a rural setting. After some thought, we both realized we wouldn’t like the small town setting.” Another participant, after working in several different settings for the most of his career, moved back to his large alma mater in a medium-size town in a rural setting. He affectionately described this move as ‘coming home.’ Yet another participant stated that he and his wife intended to stay a few years in the ‘first job.’ The local area (medium-sized university in medium sized-town in the middle of farmland) didn’t appeal to them at the time, but as they became more integrated into the community and started their family, they grew to like it. They have never moved. All three of these participants are very happy with their choices because the locale matched their personal and professional lives. On the other end of the spectrum, many years ago, a colleague

stated ‘it really doesn’t matter where I live, as the local environment is not that critical to me liking my work.’ Apparently, most individuals in the academy strive to lead integrated lives

### **Conclusion**

The factors identified above are not all-inclusive. There are many intricacies that come together to make personal and professional lives enjoyable and satisfying. Appendix A summarizes some important questions to ask of yourself and your partner or spouse prior to accepting a teaching job. There are as many reasons for choosing a location in which to establish your career as there are health education faculty in the U.S. However, these six factors provide a good starting point for utilizing a systematic decision making process when considering where you would like to live and work. Finding the perfect place may seem impossible, but there are health educators who have done just that. Interestingly, due to the process of living life, your perceptions, priorities, and even the sources of joy and satisfaction at the beginning of your teaching career may change as you progress through your career. Life events such as getting married, having children, having spouse/partner relationship problems, struggling with your own health, dealing with aging parents (and death of parents as well as other personal tragedies), tiring of local terrain such as mostly cloudy days, mostly wet weather, or tiring of campus politics, or just simply realizing you want new experiences, will undoubtedly modify priorities. Senior faculty from our qualitative study who have moved, have not regretted it. Some faculty have not moved and are equally happy. Whatever choice is made, it is clear that doctoral graduates who examine factors beyond salary issues will be more likely to find balance and an appropriate “fit” in their new career, regardless of number of career moves.

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## Appendix A Professional Questions

### **Questions To Ask Yourself When Deciding Upon A Job Setting**

- 1) Are other members of the department conducting research in which you are interested, so that you will have collaborators?
- 2) Are you more comfortable being a part of a large campus, or do you prefer a smaller campus? (Smaller campuses may mean smaller classes.)
- 3) Is your career enhanced by having master's and/or doctoral students?
- 4) Are there opportunities to mentor and fund graduate students?
- 5) Is department morale good?
- 6) Is support provided for travel, phone calls, copying, other research needs?
- 7) Are teaching responsibilities well-matched to my preparation and equitable with responsibilities of other colleagues?
- 8) Is it an independent 'Department' of health education or is it encompassed within a larger multi-disciplinary department? If encompassed, what is the level of freedom, and is there dominance by the larger unit?
- 9) What is the range of experience of the faculty?
- 10) What is the departmental process for tenure and promotion ?
- 11) Are faculty professionally active in the local, state, regional, national health education organizations?
- 12) Does the college/department administration support (money, release time, etc) you being professionally active?

### **Personal Questions**

- 1) Is this place compatible with my spouse/partner's employment ambitions, educational goals and/or leisure interests?
- 2) Is this a place that offers an acceptable "quality of personal and professional life?"
- 3) Is this a place that meets my/our recreational and lifestyle needs?