




Position Opening: Professor



Is College Teaching a Career You Should Consider?

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Are you joking? I was under the impression that academic jobs are scarce.

Jobs were scarce in the 1970s and 1980s. But a number of encouraging signs suggest that the academic market is opening up. There is concern that the number of applicants will not be sufficient to fill available slots in several disciplines. Bowen and Sosa (1989) recently predicted that enough *psychology* PhDs are available to meet the demand for new faculty positions in the foreseeable future. This study did not, however, take into account the large percentage of psychology PhDs who do not become teachers because they pursue careers in an applied field such as clinical or counseling psychology. One report (National Research Council, 1991) found that 52.3% of the doctoral degree recipients in psychology plan to engage in professional services whereas only 15.8% plan to engage in teaching.

As long as colleges and universities continue to need teachers for a balanced undergraduate curriculum with core training in the scientific method and exposure to theories and research in a number of content areas, teaching shortages in non-applied areas of psychology may be imminent. Even if you decide a full-time teaching career isn't for you, there is often the need for part-time instructors who are well-trained, good teachers.

What's it really like to be a professor? It seems to me that teaching all the time might get boring.

"The essence of academic life is the opportunity—indeed, the demand—for continual investment in oneself." (Rosovsky, 1990)

Contrary to the popular stereotype, there is more to being a college professor than standing in front of a classroom full of students several hours a day. Time in the classroom, like the tip of an iceberg, is only the most obvious thing a professor does. Course preparation alone, including keeping up with the latest theories and research and devising meaningful student learning activities, takes hours of work behind the scenes.

The career of professor is multifaceted, usually involving research and campus/community service (advising, committee, and administrative work) in addition to teaching. Because the relative emphasis on these activities varies from college to college, what you have seen during your undergraduate years at a particular college or university may not give you the

full picture of the range of opportunities for faculty. For example, some community colleges emphasize teaching almost to the exclusion of research and service. Research institutions that train doctoral students expect scholarly activities and usually deemphasize campus/community service. At small private or liberal arts colleges, active involvement in campus life, although not absolutely required, often is strongly encouraged and adds to the enjoyment of being a faculty member. A person who is a successful and satisfied teacher in one setting may not necessarily be as successful or satisfied in another.

The good news is that the diversity of institutional settings and missions—public vs. private, two-year vs. four-year, small vs. large, secular vs. religious, undergraduate vs. graduate focus—and their variation in terms of job opportunities and expectations, allows you to seek a teaching job compatible with your own particular interests and abilities.

Why are you emphasizing teaching in the job of professor? From what I understand, it's research that gets you tenure and promotion.

"Even many of the most research-oriented of American colleges and universities have begun to recognize that in their devotion to scholarship they may have neglected the most fundamental of all their responsibilities: Their students." (U.S. News & World Report, October 15, 1990)

As the above quote suggests, teaching may be returning to center stage. Good teaching makes a real difference in people's lives. Students at one university who were asked what factors are most important in the learning process gave a top role to a teacher who wants to teach, who knows and loves the subject, and who is willing to learn from students.

The centrality of teaching is at odds with the often cited "publish or perish" dictum regarding tenure and promotion. Certainly, prospective professors interested in positions at four-year colleges and universities should expect to show evidence of scholarly productivity in order to be hired, retained, tenured, and promoted. However, the emphasis on research over teaching is being reconsidered at some institutions. Foundations, government agencies, and colleges and universities themselves are calling for and implementing major reforms involving improvement of undergraduate education, balancing research with

other institutional commitments, and defining scholarship more broadly (Boyer, 1990; Grassmuck, 1990). It has been proposed that scholarship be viewed as having four components: discovery of new knowledge, integration of knowledge, application of knowledge, and *teaching*. It has been further suggested that graduate students be required to participate in teaching seminars.

What kinds of teachers are needed? I'm not so sure that I fit the picture of the typical college professor.

All types of teachers are needed. Psychology teachers should represent both genders and a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Most importantly, we need good teachers.

Good college teachers facilitate student learning. They care about students and like to be around them. They are curious and cultivate their own intellectual development. Good college teachers do much more than transmit knowledge; they reach out to students in many ways. In a recent study (Gray-Shellberg, 1991), students and faculty described outstanding teachers as *caring, fair, knowledgeable, interesting and interested, understanding, helpful, supportive, enthusiastic, intelligent, organized, dedicated, and creative*. Good teachers have a concern for the entire educational experience of students as reflected by such outside the classroom activities as advising and mentoring.

One way to assess whether you are "professor material" is to see how well you compare with good college teachers as defined by Cole (1986). Ask yourself several questions: (1) After requesting people who know you well to list five characteristics that describe you, do "high energy level," "active," and "excellent sense of humor" show up? (2) Have your professors let you know that they think you are an outstanding student? Have you been encouraged to go to graduate school? (3) Do you agree that life is an exciting adventure to be encountered and explored? (4) Do you have broad interests that extend beyond psychology such as the arts, painting, sculpting, composing, writing? (5) Have you taken steps to improve your communication skills and the way you present yourself to others?

Are there any kinds of people who shouldn't teach? Some professors don't appear to like what they are doing.

There is no single, correct teaching method. Because

students vary in their learning styles, a good professor for one student may be ineffective for another. However, if the above descriptions of a good teacher sound like your total opposite, then teaching may not be for you.

Those who fail at teaching often did not realize that teaching is hard work that requires intensive preparation. Unsuccessful teachers may not like or respect students. Sometimes teachers are simply in the wrong teaching setting for them, and their disillusionment and low morale affects the quality of their teaching.

People who are impatient or irritable would probably not enjoy teaching because students (and other faculty!) can sometimes be slow, thoughtless, or difficult. Also, people who view students as impediments to their research might want to seek career avenues other than teaching. Those who dislike reading would find the responsibility of self-directed continuing education burdensome. People who work best with a great deal of structure may find the varied roles and open, ever-changing schedule uncomfortable. If considerable material worth is an important target, other careers are certainly more lucrative. Fear of speaking in front of groups could be a disadvantage, although the performing aspect of teaching usually improves considerably with experience.

What kind of education and training do I need to become a college professor? I think I'll need a PhD, but I'm worried that if I don't have close to a 4.0 I won't get into graduate school.

Most disciplines, including psychology, need undergraduate professors who are broadly educated, not just specialists in their field. The best foundation for a teaching career is an undergraduate program in the liberal arts that includes plenty of courses in fields outside of psychology. Don't be in a hurry to specialize; that will happen soon enough in graduate school.

To teach at most community colleges, you'll need at least a master's degree and often a doctorate. A four-year college or university usually requires a doctorate. Good sources of advice on graduate school are *The Complete Guide to Graduate School Admission: Psychology and Related Fields* (Keith-Spiegel, 1991) and the annually updated APA publication *Graduate Study in Psychology and Associated Fields* (American Psychological Association, 1990). Many graduate programs do not require near-perfect grades or GRE scores, especially if you have other assets

such as research experience or involvement in special projects. However, be sure to select a degree program from a regionally accredited institution so that your accomplishments will be respected by prospective recruitment committees.

The perceived prestige of a university is not necessarily an accurate index of the educational quality of its programs. If you are interested in teaching, in addition to whatever other attributes you are looking for in a graduate school, seek programs that offer competent training and apprenticeship for teaching assistants and that have some faculty dedicated to undergraduate teaching who will support your desire to teach.

What are the rewards of teaching? Also, I am sure there is a downside to teaching. What is it?

"There is nothing more inspiring than to see previously listless students catch fire, than to watch previously self-doubting students realize that they have the potential for dazzling insights and accomplishments, than to help groping, curious spirits actualize what they never dreamed they could achieve." (Wertheimer, 1991)

The rewards of teaching are many: Touching the lives of others in a positive and meaningful way; continuing your own learning and scholarship in a manner of your own choosing; selecting from a myriad of roles—teacher, educator, role model, advisor, counselor, mentor, researcher, scholar, consultant—all of which are acceptable in performing your duties (Gray-Shellberg, 1990). You are, in many ways, your own boss; professors have an exceptional degree of autonomy and time flexibility, even when compared with other professionals. The campus environment allows you to try new positions (even careers) without necessarily losing access to students and the classroom. Thus you can direct a grant, become a department chair or dean, or take on any one of a number of leadership roles. In addition, you are part of a community of interesting and stimulating people, including psychologists, teachers in other disciplines, and, of course, students. In such a setting, there is never an excuse for being bored!

Most people who become college professors do so because they love reading about, studying, exploring, and discussing their field of study. A great reward of teaching is that you get to do these things . . . and get paid for doing them!

Helping others achieve their highest potential is

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what teaching is largely about. The downside is that some students are unable or unwilling to participate in their own growth. This is disappointing. Other downsides in some departments include the frustrations of bureaucratic red tape, unwanted committee/administrative work, lazy or exploitative peers, budget cuts and less-than-ideal resources or working conditions, too-large class sizes, and inter- and intra-departmental feuding.

Wouldn't I have to take a vow of poverty? I understand that college professors don't make much money.

One will not get rich teaching, and professors certainly make less money than those in some other professions. However, it is important to realize that most faculty salaries are based on 9 or 10 months of work, not twelve. This leaves a long summer period and often term breaks for which there are no formal job duties. This time can be used for reading, course preparation, and research—sometimes compensated by college or external grants—or vacation or even other employment. Faculty have many opportunities for outside employment including consulting, speaking engagements, and private practice. Fringe benefits, such as health insurance, are often quite attractive. There is no "overhead" cost of doing business.

A considerable salary range may exist from Assistant Professor to Professor and there are considerable salary differences among institutions, but the average salary for full professors in all kinds of institutions in 1990–91 was \$56,210. Assistant professors averaged \$34,640 (Ehrenberg, 1991).

OK, I'm interested! Where do I go from here?

Talk to professors who are good role models. Ask them what they do besides teaching, and how they like their work. What are their gripes about the job? Would they do it all over again? Talk as well to the career development and placement specialists on your campus. Also browse through several issues of *Teaching of Psychology* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to get an idea of the range of relevant issues. To prepare for teaching, become a Student Affiliate of Division Two of the American Psychological Association. The references cited in this pamphlet also contain more information on issues related to teaching.

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You might also look at your choices for areas of concentration in graduate school from a new perspective. Psychology departments teach courses in all or most of the major areas of psychology (such as learning, memory, abnormal, physiological, sensation and perception, personality, social, developmental, statistics, and methodology) and therefore require a range of specialization among their professors. This means you can actually immerse yourself in your favorite subject area and get a job teaching it. So, if your first love is experimental psychology but you have been leaning toward clinical because you think that the job prospects are better, you may want to reconsider. In choosing areas of specialization, the cardinal rule should be to follow your own interests and abilities. Remember also, if you're interested in counseling, that the job of college professor includes many helping roles—advisor, mentor, counselor, role model—as well as teacher.

Finally, try to keep in touch with a favorite undergraduate professor during your graduate program. Your assumption that your graduate school professors will support and further stimulate your interest in teaching may not be correct. Advanced degree training programs usually stress research over teaching, and the faculty may not be sensitive to the goals of students who view teaching as their primary career interest.

In summary, being a professor is a joy and a challenge; please consider college teaching as a career opportunity. You are wanted and needed.

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