

## **AM I MISSING A PIECE?:**

### **EXAMINING THE PUZZLE OF A POST-TENURE CAREER**

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#### **Vexation**

Research, teaching and service. These are the three legs of the stool that holds the golden promise of tenure. At my large state university, the research leg may be chunkier than the others, but none is spindly. Historically, this “teaching university” received glory for excellence in teaching with significant levels of service to the larger community of local school districts. While the path to promotion now includes far more research, it still carries with it heavy teaching and service expectations. I like all three. But, I am vexed by my inability to balance all three and do them well. My colleagues talk about being overworked, but I often feel that I am more “unbalanced” than others.

Our department of teacher education has professional development schools and partner districts. These connections with schools were a major draw for me when I was seeking a faculty position. I wanted, and still want, to stay close to K-12 classrooms. I teach methods courses on-site at local schools and I spend, on average, more than one day per week teaching in K-12 classrooms. I believe, wholeheartedly, that education professors need to be in classrooms. In science education, more than in science, I think it is easy to enter an “ivory tower” state. On occasion I, like many of my colleagues, fall into the trap of presenting an ideal image of teaching, without remembering the challenges. Spending significant time in the schools reminds me of the challenges, keeps me current with the issues facing teachers, and feeds my soul.

Our university has won numerous awards for high levels of research among universities that do not offer independent Ph.D programs. Our faculty members consistently bring in remarkable levels of external funding, considering the teaching loads and lack of independent Ph.D. programs. We do have joint doctoral programs with other universities, so there is some access to graduate students, but the numbers are very small. The number of master’s students is much higher, but almost all of these students are teaching full-time and attending classes in the evening. Very few of them work as graduate research assistants. In fact, I do not believe there have been any in science education in the nine years I have been at the university. Given these limitations, one might expect that research is an after-thought. It is, however, the primary criterion for promotion and the highest status marker in the College. The development of research ideas and proposals, the review of the literature, and the discussions with colleagues around the country fulfill my intellectual need that was never touched as a K-12 classroom teacher or as a wetlands biologist. I learn so much with every project. I feel that I am continually growing and stretching myself in a different way than I do with any other aspect of my life.

I am a teacher. It is a defining part of my self-concept. It is not just what I do. It is who I am. In the past I have taught elementary students, migrant students, biology students, chemistry students, and environmental education students. Even when I had a job as a wetlands biologist, I found ways to teach part-time. Now I am a science education professor, but I continue to refer to myself as a teacher. I know it confuses people and I often must clarify, but I still define myself with that language. Teaching is fun. I delight in seeing students make connections among ideas, concepts, and terminology. I receive immense pleasure from figuring out a different way to help people make sense of an idea that had previously confused them. Just as water would satiate a parched man, the declaration “I get it, now” leaves me eager to continue to the next adventure. In the department of teacher education at my university, we teach four 3-unit courses each semester, unless we use grant funds to reduce our load or we successfully compete among our colleagues for assigned time. Although I rarely teach four courses a semester, it is common to teach three. International programs are also emphasized for students at our university. We are located near an international border and we have a goal to increase our study abroad programs. I believe that students gain much insight from international programs and I have developed a student teaching experience in Mexico. Watching people learn and grow, in a multitude of contexts, is exhilarating.

“So”, you may be asking yourself, “it sounds like you are engaged and active in your career. Why is this vexing?” The vexation is that I cannot do it all, nor do it as well as I would like. And, if I can’t do it all well, I don’t know how to prioritize and decline opportunities. Sometimes I wonder if there is a gender component to this vexation. Are women more prone to feeling they need to do everything? If a colleague asks me to work on a research project, or a teacher asks me to come and model a few lessons out at a school, I find it very nearly impossible to decline, unless I already have a commitment for the same time period. Part of the reluctance to say no is that I find the tasks inherently compelling. But, I also feel like it is part of my job (You know...research, teaching AND service!). This feeling is particularly strong because there is so much work that needs to be done in our field of science education. We are still early in the evolution of our research base. Many of our elementary schools are

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including very little science in the curricula. Underrepresented groups of students are still performing poorly on numerous measures of science understanding. The needs are daunting.

Yet, spread too thin, I cannot do my best work. For example, despite having successfully competed for external funding and collecting large amounts of interesting data, I have not published in several years. In a career such as ours, with so many opportunities and demands, and a fair amount of autonomy, how does one carve out a work-life that feels rich, satisfying, and *enough* without losing all life outside of work.

### **Venture**

My venture is still fuzzy. There are days when I think it is simple. I decide that I should look at the current priorities of my university and divide my work hours accordingly. On other days it seems equally simple, but in a different direction. I decide that I should look into my heart and prioritize my time based on what most feeds my soul, even if it has promotion consequences. Occasionally, I think that I should just walk away from the career because it should not be this hard to feel that I am successfully meeting the demands of my job. Most days, I beat up on myself for taking on additional commitments. Then I chug away, doing the best that I can, saying “If I only had a little more time, I know I could do this better” or “I’m sure I can catch up over the summer.”

While I think this is a general vexation for many people, I believe the solution must be different for each person. My current plan is to identify ways to be more successful in writing during the next few years. I have tried two common recommendations, including setting aside a particular time each day to write and seeking a mentor, but neither has been effective. Writing has not felt “urgent” since receiving tenure, while teaching and working in the schools is always urgent. In addition, I find it very difficult to ask for assistance from my colleagues because everyone is so busy.

I continue to seek ways to make myself accountable and to improve my writing skills. My first thought is to find another person who needs to do more writing. Perhaps we can be accountable to each other. I have started looking into writing courses. If I can find a course that focuses on academic writing, I’ll enroll in it. My first task will be writing up findings from my project focusing on the social and academic experiences during extended science field trips for urban secondary students. In this project, I worked with an urban high school with the following demographics: 2500 students, 100% free and reduced lunch, 60% English Learners, the highest juvenile crime rate and the highest pregnancy rate among 15-19 year olds in the city. The project included taking students to Baja California, Mexico to study marine biology for five weeks. Many of the students have never been to the ocean, despite living less than 15 miles from the coast. I looked at how the trip influenced students’ academic and social perspectives. I learned a lot about why traditional science education can fail urban students. It is a fascinating project with ample data for articles for researchers and practitioners.

However, the real mystery for me is to find a way to make writing seem as enjoyable as school-based service and teaching. Becoming more active in writing may not provide me with additional time, but I think it would make me feel more successful in the career and it would give me the illusion of more balance. Because the truth is, I never complain that I have to do too many school-based grant proposals or projects.

I am hoping that by sharing my vexation in an environment of trust with colleagues who may face some of these same feelings and experiences, I will be better prepared to find an acceptable, if not perfect, balance. Maybe, if it isn’t too much to ask, a balance that leaves time for laundry and an occasional visit to the gym. But, I think I need a deadline. If I don’t find a way to put the pieces together in a sustainable manner within five years, I will consider a career change.