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Life After Graduate School in Psychology: Insider’s Advice From New Psychologists

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Teaching-Oriented Institutions: "And Those Who Can’t"

ANNE FERRARI

In my role as an assistant professor at a liberal arts college, I’ve encountered many conservative statements such as: “I can’t write this paper, pretending that I’m gay because it could never happen!” “I’m sorry but a paper about the pros and cons of legalized drugs would be against my religion.” “OK, we know, we know, men are pigs … could we please talk about something else?” These comments have inspired me in my work to challenge students’ thinking and have taught me that learning is a lifelong and reciprocal process. Education is the one entity that can serve to level the playing field in a world that unfortunately is still struggling with issues such as sexism, racism, and ageism. College professors are in positions of enormous power to open minds, expand horizons, and to change and improve lives. If I can help students become less racist, homophobic, judgmental, or teach them to seek answers, ask questions, or to be curious, then I’ve done some good and this brings me great joy. And much to my surprise, I find that I’ve learned quite a bit from my students along the way.
Why Be a Psychology Instructor?

As a first-generation college student and single mother, I knew firsthand the impact education could have on a life. Growing up in a small conservative community where racism and sexism abounded, my psychology courses helped me to understand my world and to rise above it. I could think of no better occupation than one that would allow me to give back to others what psychology professors gave to me.

Finding part-time teaching positions in the popular major of psychology is relatively easy to do, so I, like many of my colleagues, taught as an adjunct as a way to earn money during my graduate school years. Adjunct professors are part-time instructors; they usually receive no fringe benefits although some city and state schools have begun to offer health benefits to adjuncts who have taught for at least two consecutive semesters. Because many liberal arts institutions require only a master’s degree for adjunct teaching, most graduate students can begin teaching after their first or second year of graduate school, when a master’s degree is usually completed. The pay varies considerably, with some institutions paying as little as $1,500 a course and others as much as $4,000.

As I busily taught as an adjunct during my graduate years and gained the approval of various psychology departments in New York, I foolishly thought that my hard work would be rewarded with a full-time position. However, the chairs of these departments apologetically told me that although they would love to hire a full-timer, this just wasn’t in the budget. Positions within departments became available only when a full-time member retired or relocated, and once this occurred, competition was already great.

As my oral defense of my dissertation grew nearer, I became more jaded and desperate about finding a full-time position. I was teaching five classes a semester, all at different institutions. Some of the classes paid top salary; some paid lower, but even still, my yearly salary amounted to only about $20,000. Many institutions would not even consider a candidate who was ABD (All but Dissertation); some would consider a candidate, but only if the oral defense date were set. I also worried about my publication record. Although I participated in much research that was presented at various conventions, I was yet to be published.

Fortunately, after applying to four local colleges, I received an offer from the College of New Rochelle, a small teaching, liberal arts college with a population of about 500 female undergraduates. My doctorate, ample teaching experience, and familiarity with diverse groups qualified me. I would be required to teach a full load, four
classes, as well as serve on college-wide committees. However, publication of research was not required.

What It’s Like at a Teaching Institution

The small teaching college is typically more concerned about superb teaching than about a publication record. As an example of this, my college does four classroom observations of untenured faculty each year: one each by the dean, the chair, a colleague of the assistant professor’s choice, and a colleague of the administration’s choosing. A formal written report is submitted for each, describing the observation based on class content, organization, quality of instruction, classroom climate, teacher–student interaction, and the teacher’s strengths and weaknesses. In addition, student evaluations are collected for each course, each semester.

Student evaluations are also taken very seriously by small teaching colleges. As an adjunct, I remember listening in on the conversations of untenured faculty in various schools who complained that the “nice” professors received the good student evaluations leaving the “real” professors who “actually taught” with undue criticism. I didn’t believe them then, nor do I now. It is more probable that the “good” professor who “actually teaches” will be the well-liked one because (surprise!) most students really want to learn. Although there is some truth in what these disgruntled employees were mumbling, it is not the whole story. The “easy A” professor may get some good student evaluations, but such a professor will also receive criticism from the hardworking students that the course was too easy, not challenging, not stimulating, and that they learned nothing. Yes, we all want to be liked by our students at first, but we can be liked by being good, fair teachers who really want our students to learn. It should be difficult to receive an A in your class; it should be attainable, but a challenge (not like one of my college professors who said only God gets an A). When students do receive an A, they can feel very proud. Such a standard gives more meaning to B and C grades, as well.

Unlike the large, research-based institution, which demands publication for the attainment of tenure, the small teaching college values service to the college. Instructors are expected to join committees, attend meetings, perform student advisement, attend student ceremonies, such as graduation and convocations, create new courses, and to be involved with the college community. Some of my involvement in the college includes advising about 35 students, serving as advisor to a school’s honors literary magazine, to the psychology club, to Psi Chi, to the straight and gay campus alliance, and serving as a member
Table 2.1 Activities of an Assistant Professor in a Small Teaching College

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<tr>
<th><strong>Teaching Duties</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Preparing class lectures</td>
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<td>Designing new courses</td>
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<td>Updating old courses</td>
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<td>Grading tests, papers</td>
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<td>Working with students on independent research projects</td>
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<td>Meeting with students for remedial support</td>
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<td>Maintaining course management intranet site</td>
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<th><strong>Service Duties</strong></th>
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<td>Attending faculty meetings</td>
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<td>Attending college committee meetings (i.e., college senate, search committee, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Serving as advisor to student-run clubs and publications</td>
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<td>Assisting with recruitment by attending open houses, freshman orientations, etc.</td>
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<td>Advising individual students</td>
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<td>Writing student letters of recommendation</td>
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<th><strong>Research Duties</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Attending or presenting at professional conferences</td>
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<td>Seeking research opportunities outside of college for own intellectual advancement</td>
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<th><strong>Miscellaneous Duties</strong></th>
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<td>Designing and updating departmental Web site</td>
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<tr>
<td>Answering voicemail, e-mail</td>
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<td>Filing and maintaining student records</td>
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of the college Appeals Committee, the Council of the Faculty, the College Senate, and a subbranch of the senate, Student Services. I have also created a new honors course and served as the chair for the hiring of a new honors director. Although I have recently been published, many of my colleagues have not and this has in no way prevented them from securing tenure. More important to the college are their teaching and service. As a professor wishes to advance in rank, however, from associate professor to full professor, publications and professional activities become more important. Of utmost concern to the college for tenure, however, is that the professor be an excellent teacher who motivates students to achieve. For a complete list of duties performed in a small, teaching college, see Table 2.1.

A Day in My Professional Life

It’s Tuesday morning and I’ve arrived at my office at 8:35, which gives me exactly 1 hour before class. Although this seems like enough time to review my notes, after checking my voicemail and e-mail and
responding to my messages, I still feel rushed before class. Prior to class, a student pokes her head in my door and asks if her son can sit in on class. She tells me that she is having problems with her ex-husband and the child was kept home from school. Although my college does have a formal policy that prohibits children in the classroom for insurance reasons, it is generally not enforced. As a woman's college, it is hard for most professors to refuse a child's temporary admittance to a class, and I am no different. In fact, I keep a secret stash of small toys and books that my own children have outgrown in my desk drawer just for occasions like this. I make sure I ask my student if her son is receiving counseling services, especially since there is much conflict in their home at this time. She assures me that both she and her son attend family counseling. Because this is an experimental psychology course and I will not be discussing sex or any other topics inappropriate for a ten-year-old, I allow her son to sit in, and similar to other children I've had in the classroom, he is well behaved and not disruptive.

I have another class directly after this one with only 10 minutes to get to a different building. I am giving a test next period and realize that I forgot to drop a copy of the test off at our Learning Center, where one of my students who is learning disabled will take her exam. I rush off to the Learning Center, drop off the test, and rush over to class. Because I am 5 minutes late, I tell the class that they will have 5 minutes beyond the normal class time to finish their exams.

After the test, I return to my office. It’s 12:30 and I have 30 minutes to myself before office hours begin. I usually like to go over to the faculty room for lunch. It’s nice to get together with faculty from other departments whom I rarely get to talk with otherwise. My institution provides a lovely faculty/staff area for lunch, with free tea, coffee, and ice water available all day. Although this may sound like a small offering, it is a greatly appreciated one that I never had available to me in other institutions. However, lately I rarely have time to share a joke and a bite to eat with my colleagues, as I seem to become busier each semester. Instead, I wolf down a quick lunch at my desk.

I’m actually glad that I did not go to the faculty lounge because a previous student of mine, who graduated last year, has stopped by. It is lovely to see her and I hug her in my greeting. She is doing well but is upset because she cannot find work in the field of psychology. She is currently working as a billing clerk. She has gone on some interviews at residential facilities, but has not accepted job offers because they were either too low paying or seemed to be more babysitting duties than psychology. I remind her that she may have to accept such
a job and then work her way up through the institution. Perhaps she could volunteer there on weekends to see how she feels about such work. I also encourage her to apply to graduate school. Because I regularly clip help wanted ads in the field of psychology from local newspapers, I am able to offer her some other possible job opportunities in her field before she leaves. She promises to keep in touch and jots down my e-mail address.

It’s 1:00 and my office hours have begun. I have an appointment with a student who had plagiarism issues in her last paper. Perhaps taking my advice regarding citations literally, she directly quoted three pages worth of information in the methods section of her lab report placing quotation marks on the entire section. She argues that there was no way to reword this information and she had to quote it. Because other parts of her paper were correctly done, she did not fail this assignment, but her grade was very poor. I want to be sure that she understands what she did wrong so that she will not repeat her mistake on her next lab report. I give her an extra assignment for practice, in which she must read a certain section from a psychology text and put it into her own words.

It’s 1:30 and I need to prepare for the lab portion of my experimental psychology course. We are learning how to perform a statistical analysis called a t-test using SPSS computer software having just done one by hand in class earlier this week. I have prepared a worksheet that will walk the student through the necessary steps. Because the copier has run out of toner, I print the copies from my computer.

At 2:00, lab starts. Students enjoy lab because of its applied emphasis. Because we are a small college and cannot afford a site license for SPSS, I have only loaded it on my own personal computer. Students work in pairs and, as there are only eight students in the class, it doesn’t take very long. While students are waiting for the computer, they are occupied with other work. In addition to our SPSS assignment, the class must decide the topic of their final experiment. The students will be responsible for researching this topic area, devising or choosing an instrument to measure this phenomenon, distributing the instrument among the college population, entering the data and analyzing the data using SPSS, and writing a complete research report. They decided to examine whether women on an all-female campus spend significantly less time on looks and/or dieting as a result of lack of competition for males, compared to women on a coed campus.

It’s 3:55 and class was officially over 5 minutes ago. There is a class waiting to get in. I quickly shutdown the computer and leave. Teaching three classes on Tuesdays always tires me out so I head on home.
Foci in a Liberal Arts College

Influencing World Views

Many topics will arise in class that may not be part of your lecture, but that need to be addressed, nonetheless. It is important to be flexible and to include what is relevant to the students. It is also extremely important to address areas of intolerance, such as racism and sexism. Assignments such as Gay for a Day, the brainchild of my mentor Reesa Vaughter, asks students to put themselves in the shoes of a gay individual. They are asked to imagine, for one day, that they are gay (understanding that the student may actually be gay, students may also write the perspective as in the closet or out of the closet). They must pay attention to the little activities that they take for granted, for example, calling their significant other on the phone at work, and record how these activities would be different. Although such an assignment is not expected to change strong religious convictions, which many students have about gay life, it is expected to assuage any anger and increase tolerance.

Protecting Students

Being an ethical professor also necessitates protecting your students. Because psychology lends itself to the sharing of personal experiences in the classroom, many students disclose information without realizing its effect on their peers. A few years ago in another institution, in a class titled Psychology of Sex Roles, a foreign exchange student laughingly reminisced how a 92-year-old woman from his country had been raped. “Why would they rape a 92-year-old,” he wondered. For a few moments, there was a silence. Then the trouble began. The women of the class (who were the majority) angrily attacked the exchange student; a few even rose from their seats and began to approach him. Anticipating a riot, I quickly pointed out to the class that, although we may not like what he said, his words represented the opinions of many. While others are savvy enough to not share such thoughts due to fear of reprisals, he chose to speak his mind. I encouraged the class to be the instructor for the rest of the period. How could we reach this young man and others like him? The class began to problem-solve rather than blame and I sighed in relief.

As professors, every student in our class must feel safe. Similar to the elementary school teacher, who must protect her students from teasing, a professor must protect freedom of expression. Students such as the above-mentioned foreign exchange student actually provide us with a
wonderful opportunity to teach tolerance and restraint. And like the elementary school teacher who is a role model and sometimes the idol of young children, so too is the professor in many ways. A derogatory statement on my part regarding the foreign exchange student may have intensified the class’s feelings and perhaps ostracized him for the rest of the semester or longer. On a small campus with limited socializing opportunities, this could be especially damaging.

Helping Students/Boundaries

Students are eager to share their own and their families’ psychological disturbances with their professors. Because small classes are considered to be more beneficial to economically and academically disadvantaged students than those who are not (Dillon & Kokkelemborg, 2002), the small college may be more likely to attract such at-risk students, and the professor at this institution may be privy to a variety of student personal information. Over the years I’ve heard about students’ child custody battles, financial crises, eating disorders, anxiety disorders, learning disabilities, and sexual abuse. Although as professors we cannot counsel our students as this would create a dual relationship, this does not mean that we cannot be empathetic and understanding when a student Blurts out this information. As my colleague, Lisa Paler, states, “We cannot do therapy, but we can be therapeutic.” Some professors, afraid of appearing unethical, quickly dismiss the comment or make a hasty recommendation for a referral. When a student shares personal information with me, I generally provide some general empirical information on the topic, offer my encouragement, and then make a referral to our counseling center.

Understanding and Appreciation for Diversity

The proportion of American students who are minorities has grown. In 1976, minorities represented 16% of college populations; in 2000 this figure grew to 28% (Digest of Education Statistics, 2002). My own small college changed from a predominately white, upper-middle-class student body to a currently more diverse mix. Teaching ethnic minorities requires that we be cognizant that certain groups may feel apprehensive and distrustful of institutions as a result of possible discriminatory treatment in the past. Also, most of our students are first-generation college students and do not have experts at home to seek advice from. Our role as advisors becomes even more important for these students. For example, some students believe that a bachelor’s in psychology will allow them to be a wealthy psychologist
when they graduate. We owe it to all of our students to be as honest as possible so that they have an understanding of the major that they are undertaking, because they may not receive this advice from home. Although I feel strongly that education should be appreciated for its intrinsic value, I also believe that the first-generation minority student may represent a separate and distinct case. To this student, jobs are a very real and pragmatic concern, especially if the family is currently living in or near poverty. The idea that education should be valued in and of itself, without ties to the practical nature of employment, may be more a mind-set for those who never had to worry about getting a job, apartment, or feeding a child. I do not believe that discussing jobs and their salaries takes anything away from the educational experience and may be necessary in the case of the minority student.

Advantages and Challenges

Getting to Know Students

I believe that psychology courses are empowering courses. Since the small teaching college allows for more dialogue in the classroom, a professor learns a great deal about students' lives. Although many students suffer from medical students' syndrome, thinking they have every disturbance in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, they also learn which behaviors are normal. Once during a lecture on human sexuality about children and masturbation, a young mother raised her hand and asked, "To get them to stop, you should beat them, right [she did not mean abuse]?" As awful as this sounds, I was really glad that she asked this question. Here was an opportunity to learn about normal child behavior and discipline. We were able to discuss the various studies done on physical punishment, effective discipline, and sexual behavior as well as the various societal, cultural, and familial pressures that influence our parenting. I would like to think that education empowered this young mother to reconsider the way that she was raised for a healthier upbringing for her son and would prompt her to research answers to parenting problems she might have in the future.

Staying With It

Teaching should reflect contemporary concerns. I've always thought that professors, in general, age well. Perhaps that is because our students help us to stay young by keeping us up to date with the current slang, music, and dances. However, they also let us know when our class material is outdated. As conscientious educators, we must make
it our business to keep abreast of the changes in our field and how these changes relate to the cultural niche of our students. For example, a lecture of psychoactive drugs and their impact on human behavior would not be complete without mention of Ecstasy, Special K, and Ritalin. However, a professor using notes from 10 years ago may not realize such an omission. Professors owe it to their students to be aware of the changes in society that affect their students so that their lectures might be relevant to students’ lives.

Grading

An area that all professors must struggle with is the grading of papers and exams. My small teaching college assigns numerous writing assignments across disciplines in an effort to improve writing, which tends to be a problem for our population. A new psychology professor may not realize that students have enormous writing difficulties. Students make many errors with homophones, run-on sentences, lack of paragraph structure, and lack of organization. Consider for example this excerpt taken from a psychology and law exam, “He touched her in a sexual manor” (to which the professor replied, “Where is this sexual manor?”). Although it takes time and energy to correct such errors, more writing practice is necessary to help students combat these problems. The area of psychology necessitates writing assignments, and although the psychology professor may choose to not penalize the student for writing errors, corrections still need to be made and practice needs to be given. I assign numerous short writing assignments in class, which are not formally graded, but which are corrected and counted as homework assignments.

It is often very difficult to grade a typical research paper. Problematic issues that arise include plagiarism and favoritism. To combat the plagiarism problem, the chair of one community college advised me to assign no research papers for introductory-level courses. The chair stated that students invariably plagiarize, therefore the professor must spend time and energy finding the plagiarized source, and the student learns nothing in the process. Instead, he advised me to offer short, critical-thinking papers. In some respects, I still follow his advice. I will often assign an interesting article or story for students to read, and then ask them to write a two to three page paper answering a predetermined question. For example, my students read Lois Gould’s “X: A Fabulous Child’s Story,” which describes a fictional child who was raised with a gender-neutral identity. The class then wrote a paper discussing the pros and cons of such socialization and whether such a
gender-neutral identity is possible. Such an assignment fosters critical thought, a component that many industries say is lacking in their newly graduated hires. Interestingly, many students have difficulty writing such a paper. I always get at least one paper that is a review of the theories of gender identity and does not answer the questions posed.

Objectivity is also an important issue when grading papers. This is especially a concern when a research paper is assigned. Students will often complain about their grade and point out that they did everything that was required of them, so why is their grade lower than their friends? Sometimes it is difficult for a professor to articulate exactly why one paper is better than another; sometimes one paper will just flow better than another. However, it is extremely important that students understand where they could have improved. My own lowest grade in graduate school was from a professor who admitted to grading "interpersonally." Realizing that subjective methods of grading were problematic for both my students and myself, I currently use a rubric for grading. I establish a number of objective standards prior to beginning grading, which will be associated with a certain number of points off. Because I use the same rubric for each student, assignments can be compared among classmates. I recommend using objective standards for the grading of all papers, whenever possible, as it enhances student learning and the feeling of being treated fairly.

Ethical Challenges

In teaching psychology, the topic of ethics comprises at least one class lecture for every psychology course taught. Therefore, one would think that psychology professors would be well versed in ethical behavior and treatment of students, and therefore there should be no need for an ethics section of this chapter. Unfortunately this is not the case. Perhaps it's not unlike the shoemaker's son whose soles have worn thin, or the barber's child who sports an unruly hairdo, but psychologists need to heed the words they preach. In my own limited history as a psychology student and professor, I have witnessed numerous occasions of unethical behavior by professors who should have known better. Problematic areas include sexual relationships and socializing with students. At the small teaching college, where the gossip circuit is strong, relationships with students may irreparably damage both the student's and the professor's reputations.

Some professors, especially younger ones, may feel that they have more in common with students than they do with the aging faculty who are their colleagues. This is especially problematic for the relocated
faculty member who recently took a position miles from family and friends. Although we can sympathize with this lonely individual, we cannot condone this behavior. Any relationships with students must wait until after that student has graduated. I remember a relationship that existed between a graduate student colleague of mine and a much senior member of the faculty. Although the class was sickened to witness their flirting back and forth during class, everything seemed fine until they broke up. At that point, the tension in the class was so thick that you could cut it with a knife. I don’t remember learning anything that semester, but I did lose respect for my professor, who instead of being a wise elder became a dirty old man.

So many subtle biases already exist in the professor–student relationship, and professors may often be unaware of them. We are humans and as human we will always favor some students over others for inexplicable reasons. Students may remind us of ourselves, our family members, or of someone we dislike. With so many subtle biases present, it makes no sense to add a larger, more blatant bias by socializing with students. Rather, we should be concerned with maintaining as much objectivity as possible. One way to do this is by creating objective standards for grading papers, as already mentioned, but another may be to grade papers blind by having students identify themselves by a code number only. This tactic is greatly appreciated by students.

Transference

College students look up to their professors and often try to emulate them. There is more psychological transference in these relationships than we realize. An example of transference arose in an adolescent psychology class, where we were discussing rites of passage of other cultures, scarification, and how tattoos perhaps represent our society’s version of scarification. I mentioned that my daughter got a tattoo while away at college and how I was not emotionally prepared for this event. Then, 2 weeks later, a young woman came up to me after class and showed me her new tattoo. Although tattoos are extremely popular among the college-aged population, I could not help but think that the idea somehow came from me. Professors have great power to sway students’ thoughts and opinions, and therefore we must be careful in expressing our own personal biases. We do not want our students to agree with us or do what we say just because we are the professor; we would rather they use the information that they have obtained in class to form their own opinions.
Preparation for an Academic Career in a Liberal Arts College

To be competitive in a very competitive job market, possessing a variety of teaching experiences is optimal. Prior to actually securing employment as an adjunct professor, I guest-lectured for my mentor to gain classroom experience. Many of my classmates obtained teaching assistantships. If a college was desperate to find an instructor for a course that I had never taught before, I would agree to teach it even though it would demand a great deal of preparation. In this way, my experience in teaching grew more diversified, thereby making me more marketable. Colleges also appreciate a professor who is willing to create novel experiences for students. This can include creating new courses, but also teaching old courses in new ways. Ideas to lend novelty to courses can be obtained from organizations such as the Society for the Teaching of Psychology located online at http://teachpsych.lemoyne.edu/teachpsych/faces/script/index.html.

Because the small teaching college cares most about teaching, a candidate should be prepared to offer a model class. Sometimes the institution will allow candidates to choose the topic that they will be lecturing on; others will assign a topic. If the candidate chooses the topic, it should be a topic area that the candidate would possibly teach for that department. If you choose the area of your dissertation, be sure to teach that area as it would apply to a psychology class, and not just summarize your research and findings. Teaching colleges need to know that candidates can teach new material on relatively short notice in an insightful and relevant manner. The model class is the candidate's opportunity to demonstrate this ability.

The type of lecture that would be given at the small teaching college varies greatly from that of a larger institution. Classes tend to not exceed 25 students and can sometimes be as small as 10. Classroom discussion is therefore expected, and a potential candidate needs to know how to elicit class discussion in a meaningful way, to prevent students from veering off on a tangent, and to demonstrate respect and interest in students' comments.

Interestingly, at a recent search at my institution for a tenure-track position, much attention was paid to the candidates' cover letters. Candidates should use the cover letter to show their fit with the institution. Specific mention should be made of experience with students similar to the population of the college, whether it's females, diverse groups, or first-generation college students. A cold, brief cover letter is equated with a cold, disinterested professor. The cover letter offers candidates an opportunity to show why they are a good fit for the institution.
Most importantly, the best preparation, training, or advice that I can offer to potential professors is to truly love working with young adults. This is not an age group for everyone. Young adults tend to be needy, impressionable, and insecure. According to Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, and Benton (2003), American college students have, over the past 13 years, increasingly needed help with anxiety/stress disorders, depression, suicidal ideation, and personality disorders. Your interactions with them will not end in the classroom because being a professor in a small institution demands a more holistic approach. You will also advise, refer, recommend, and tutor your students. They, in turn, will challenge, exhaust, amuse, invigorate, and teach you.

References

