Writing the Teaching Statement

By Rachel Narehood Austin | Apr. 14, 2006 , 8:00 AM

Take pity on me and my colleagues. As a faculty member who serves on faculty search committees and a frequent reader of job applications, I dread reading teaching statements. I have even considered asking search committees to stop asking for these essays (in which applicants discuss their teaching philosophies and their anticipated approaches to teaching) because they are so often insipid and painful to read. I've never actually made that suggestion, though, and for now, at my institution (and many others), teaching statements remain a required part of an application for a faculty position. So for every permanent-faculty search I'm involved in, I end up reading as many as several hundred insipid teaching statements. Have mercy.

It's not your fault, really, or the fault of the hundreds of other applicants. You, after all, haven't had much teaching experience when you apply for your first faculty position, so you can be forgiven for not having given teaching philosophy a lot of thought at this stage: Teaching philosophies are for people who teach. And of course your challenge is made worse by the fact that when we ask you for a teaching statement, we never really tell you what we're looking for. Probably most of us don't even know ourselves. So maybe *we* should take pity on *you*.

Tailored to the Institution

What, then, is the point of a teaching statement? One thing I'm sure of: Teaching statements serve as a filter. They help weed out applicants who don't think things through, or who take the "bulk mail" approach to a job search. Just like cover letters, teaching statements should be tailored to the institution; if yours isn't, we'll toss out your application. When you consider the hundreds of applications we have to wade through, I'm sure you'll understand why we never fail to seize the opportunity to toss out an application.

Surely, however, simply making your teaching statement specific to the type of institution you're applying to isn't sufficient. So what else can the inexperienced teacher do? The first objective should be to demonstrate a real commitment to teaching, and this is at least as important at research universities as it is at teaching-oriented colleges like the one I work at. George McClendon, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Duke University and former chair of the chemistry department at Princeton, says that even top research institutions are "first and foremost teaching institutions and are looking for a commitment to teaching which is supported by the commitment to research which keeps that teaching at the cutting edge."

"We don't necessarily expect uniquely creative pedagogy," McClendon continues, "just commitment." McClendon's sentiment was echoed by everyone else I talked to. John Lipscomb, for example, of the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, says it's important that candidates avoid presenting teaching "as a second priority." Even at institutions where the tenure decision will ultimately rest on grants received and papers published, being a good and committed teacher is necessary to make the probationary period go smoothly.

A Few Suggestions

Show us you care, but keep it short and snappy. It is hard to spend several pages talking about how much you care in general terms ("I care, I care, I care a lot ...") without tormenting the reader. A sentence or two displaying your commitment to teaching and identifying your interests in specific terms is adequate. If you can cite evidence to demonstrate your commitment to teaching, do it, but again, keep it brief. This interest can be echoed in your cover letter, again in just a sentence or two.

So now you've got enough material for maybe one paragraph. What else should be included in a noninsipid teaching statement? Here are some additional suggestions.

Write about the courses you would like to teach. Remember, this needs to be institution-specific, so some research into the institution you are applying to is helpful here. What courses are already being offered that you might teach? What new courses might you bring to the department? Don't hesitate to contact the head of the search committee if you have questions about the position's teaching expectations. The key here is balance: You want to display some interesting ideas, but don't be too adventurous. It's fine to express interest in interdisciplinary teaching--and it's a good idea to point out how the breadth of your training will allow you to teach a wide range of courses--but don't propose an interdisciplinary course among four departments before you know whether the department that's hiring you is interested in those kinds of experiments.

Alison Butler, a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and a former dean, says that a teaching statement "says a lot about the area the applicant sees himself or herself in"; keep that in mind as you discuss the types of courses that you would like to teach. Lipscomb believes it can be helpful if your vision encompasses beginning students: "Not limiting your teaching interests to advanced courses in your interest is probably good for both your application and your career."

Show what you're made of. For all their faults, teaching statements *do* tend to illuminate the character of the writer, which can work for you or against you. One of the most important qualities an inexperienced teacher can display is a willingness to learn, pay attention, and change. A statement that reflects an open mind and eagerness to learn increases the odds that you will be a long-term asset to the institution; it shows that what you can become as a teacher isn't limited by what you already are. Equally important: As a teacher, you must know yourself and be able to perform, and learn from, honest assessment. Blindly following a formula--or some online template--for writing teaching statements suggests that you don't have a voice of your own, or that you don't care to use it. Be your thoughtful self.

Jeff Nagle of Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, says: "I find the teaching statements to be helpful, if for no other reason than I think it is important for any candidate to express his or her ideas about teaching in an articulate way. It's not so much the actual philosophy they express

but that they have given the matter enough thought to have developed a philosophy that they are able to express in a clear and meaningful way."

Draw on your experiences as a student, a scholar, and a human being. Reflect on the life experiences you have had that affect how you think about teaching. How do the lessons you have learned from your own experiences affect the kind of classes that you would like to teach or the kind of teacher you would like to be? A candidate with industrial experience, for example, might write about the power of teamwork in industry and how she would construct her courses to utilize it. Reflecting on my own experiences as a mediocre-but-committed modern dancer taught me a lot about teaching chemistry. I used to assume that any student who did not get an "A" on an exam wasn't trying, until it occurred to me that no matter how hard I try in dance classes, I rarely excel. Becoming less critical of my students--while still maintaining high standards--has made me a better teacher.

A transformative personal experience--the undergraduate research experience, say, that transformed you from an indifferent sophomore into an NSF predoctoral fellow--can be worth mentioning; write about how you hope to provide your students with a similar opportunity.

Avoid promising too much. At most institutions, teaching and research compete for precious time during the first years. Don't write a teaching statement that lays out an astronomical amount of work, e.g., "I will meet individually with all my students every week and do service learning projects in the community and design projects for local science museums." You will be more than adequately busy if you do your best to teach well and *simply* while establishing a research lab.

Is this advice sufficient to assure that your teaching statement won't be painful to read? Not quite. For that, you need to consider a few points about style.

Keep it short. I've said this already, but it's worth repeating. One or two double-spaced pages are good for most statements. If you've got less to say, say less.

Write well and carefully. Poorly crafted teaching statements imply a sloppy mind or inattention to the application process. When I read poorly written statements, I discount the application. In a tenure-track search, that means NO INTERVIEW.

Researching and thinking about this article has made me more sympathetic about teaching statements. I no longer view them as a source of gratuitous torment. They can provide a search committee with useful information. Keep your statement concise, well-written, and honest. Do your homework and know the institution and the position to which you are applying. Think about why you want to be a teacher and craft a (very) few evocative paragraphs that describe something specific about your aspirations in a way that illustrates your independent, open, and

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