

Tenure, She Wrote

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Be Not Afraid: Why I left a tenure-track position at an R1 Research University.

posted in [Inside Baseball](#), [Professional Development](#), [Teaching](#) by [drdamebbiolock](#)

How do you understand your academic responsibilities? Your professional duties? What do you say when people ask you what you do? Are you a scientist? A historian or biologist? Or are you a professor? Are you both or does this change depending on the context? As I sat there trying to make the exceedingly difficult decision to leave my academic home of four years for the great unknown of a small liberal arts college (LAC), these questions disrupted my sleep. Like a good researcher, I decided that I needed to collect data – a representative sample. I called everyone I knew who had been trained at a well-funded and large R1 research university (RU) and had gained employment at a LAC. These trusted friends had experienced the wonders of being educated amidst a top-notch library system, while having access to premium laboratory and study space, and they moved on to a completely different institutional settings. How did they feel about working in a smaller more intimate, and teaching-centered environment? To my surprise, the reviews were generally positive. In fact, not a single friend discouraged me from taking the job. They were all relatively happy (as happy as tenure-track and adjunct faculty can be) chugging away at their respective LACs. Through these conversations, I learned that my understanding of life at a LAC was outdated and limited. I was in for another kind of education.

I was trained in the kind of graduate program that can make employment at an R1 RU seem both inevitable and ideal. The program was rigorous, and the intellectual resources were vast. Somewhere on campus, guest lecturers filled the hallways most days of the week, and the library even carried the primary medical journal from the island region where I completed my doctoral research. In some ways, it provided a perfect intellectual buzz.

However as we are well-aware, jobs at R1 institutions are hard to come by, and we are producing more PhDs than we can employ in these (or any) positions. (Not coincidentally, fewer recently minted PhD want to [continue on the treadmill of high intensity academic research](#) ([http://\(http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/02/the-phd-bust-americas-awful-market-for-young-scientists-in-7-charts/273339/\)](http://(http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/02/the-phd-bust-americas-awful-market-for-young-scientists-in-7-charts/273339/)) at a R1 RUs). Despite a challenging graduate career that included switching advisors after my first year, I did want to continue working in this kind of atmosphere. After completing a year-long post-doc at a different Midwestern research university, I was lucky to get a tenure-track position at an R1.

During my stint at this school, I learned quite a bit about life as a faculty member in this environment. There were immeasurable perks including a particularly lively academic community, with talks and

activities happening daily. I was blessed with an invaluable senior female colleague who served as both a mentor and friend, and a departmental climate that was supportive and encouraging. I was able to take on graduate students, and I began to expand my research with help from internal funding sources and grant-writing support.

Due to the explicit mission of the university system, I taught an incredibly diverse student body. This campus is among the top 10 most diverse campuses in the country. As a woman of color, it was a wonder every time I walked into my classroom and saw students of various economic, social, and cultural backgrounds awaiting our educational exchange. It was my belief that these resources were **only** available in this context.

As it turns out, the entirety of my experience in higher education had been spent in the halls of both private and public RUs. To be sure, there were vast differences between the small classes that I experienced as both as an undergraduate and post-doctoral instructor in the setting of the private RUs, and the larger lecture halls that I graced as a graduate student and tenure-track professor in the public RUs. There were also rather explicit differences in their missions, and thus the accessibility of these spaces for the entire community. Despite these differences, each of the schools clearly emphasized research as their primary intellectual endeavor.

After 3 years in my position, I ventured onto the job market with hopes of slaying the ever-dreaded two body problem. My husband is in the same discipline, and a few years behind me in his graduate training. With this consideration, I applied to all kinds of jobs. My intention was to get a counter offer from my home institution.

I was lucky and I was offered a position – and the contract was thorough. The two-body problem was solved, the start-up funds were substantial, and they were willing to build me a laboratory (something I did not have at the R1). However back at my home institution, a top level administrator articulated the university's unwillingness to negotiate when counter offers came from LACs. Much to my surprise and to the disappointment of my colleagues, a decision was made for me and I was off to a...small liberal arts college.

This process, this move has been incredibly informative. Despite my initial fears and reservations about what would be lost in this career transition, I have learned that much can be gained from this kind of institutional shift – and actually much is the same. I am only in my first semester in this new setting. As such, there are only a few things that I can confidently assess from this vantage point:

Teaching vs. Research

Like me, you may have thought that the major difference between a small and selective LAC and a large RU centered on emphases for purposes of tenure and promotion – an emphasis on teaching versus an emphasis on research. While this remains true (to some extent), I have found that the differences are far more nuanced. At most small LACs, one will not earn tenure without a strong teaching record. However, strong teaching with minimal scholarly activity will not earn you tenure either. In my personal experience and that of close colleagues, tenure and promotion at a R1 RU requires substantial scholarly activity with above-average teaching. At my former university, there were many fraught discussions about tenure and promotion files that reflected below-average teaching. This idea that you simply have to do both well was made clear to me as I began attending new faculty orientation meetings in this college setting.

So sure, teaching matters more here. But how much more? I never showed up unprepared at my last gig, and I cannot do that here. My classes are smaller and I structure them differently – less lecture and more student-based learning – but the material is the same and the requirement that I facilitate the learning process remains the same as well.

Resources

The budget woes of the 2008 and forward struck almost every campus mightily. However, some campuses were able to recover more quickly than others. I presumed that my best shot at sustained funding for research would come in a R1 setting, but this does not necessarily seem to be the case. While the opportunities for funding at my last gig were significant and each individual funding package was relatively large, the availability of these opportunities became increasingly slim as the budget crisis persisted. Somewhat surprisingly, I am finding that there are many funding opportunities here. However, any individual funding package may not be as large.

So there is research money available with the caveat being that students should be involved in the research process. I have been encouraged to dream big about my research and to find ways to work our students into the plans.

Community Participation

Do you know how many people said “but you will have to do so much teaching!” Yes, I am in a teaching intensive space. And I spend quite a bit of time in the classroom – but I am not spending any more time in the classroom here than I was at my last job. In fact, I teach fewer students and thus have fewer course-related housekeeping tasks to complete each week.

To be clear, there are expectations of greater visibility and accessibility to the students and the broader community (via attendance at events, screenings, talks, etc.). However, as a woman of color – folks have always expected me to be available and accessible. This is a well-documented phenomena at campuses throughout the country (Check out the amazing book *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (<http://www.usu.edu/usupress/books/index.cfm?isbn=8695>) for more on this).

However due to the small size and ethnic homogeneity of the campus, I am less anonymous here. While I have always been expected to be present, showing up has often been enough. Now, I am responsible for contributing to community building, and I cannot remain on the periphery. The part of me that loves solitary research bristles a bit at this transition. I am still trying to find my footing in this more visible space, and I am still negotiating how to participate while protecting my time for writing and research.

Final Thoughts...and an admission

I am not unaware of the fact that my ability to write this post speaks to a windfall of luck and the sheer randomness of the job market. I am not ignorant to the struggles and stress facing my colleagues in all disciplines. The job market is an unfriendly place in these budget-crunched and sometimes anti-intellectual times. That being said (in the immortal words of Joni Mitchell), I’ve looked at life from both sides now.

Many of the assumptions that I held regarding the differences between RUs and LACs were borne from my experiences at (mostly) well-funded R1 RUs. What I am learning is that campus culture and resource availability are key. Whether a large public R1 or a small private LAC, if the institution has not

weathered the financial crisis well, the opportunities for career advancement – particularly for junior faculty – will be impacted. This may come in the form of fewer teaching releases, or reduced institutional funding opportunities, or some other unseen force (furloughs, etc).

Also campus culture is key. What does this place expect of you? What is their ethos around instruction? What counts as research? If undergrads participate in your research, can that also count as instruction? If the answer to this last question is “yes”, you may be in for some surprises regarding the availability of financial and community support for your research at a LAC. Despite this broader perspective, I am still speaking from a very particular and privileged perch. For those of us (close friends included) who are struggling to find employment none of this may matter – paying the bills matters more.

However, if you ever find yourself faced with this kind of decision, I hope that you allow yourself to imagine many potential realities and definitions of self (professor, researcher, scientist, writer) in both of these kinds of spaces – no matter the institutional rank or label.

📌 [Liberal Arts College](#), [R1 Institution](#), [Tenure-track](#) 💬 [16 Comments](#)

16 thoughts on “Be Not Afraid: Why I left a tenure-track position at an R1 Research University.”

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October 14, 2013 at 11:42 pm

Thank you for sharing these powerful insights, and thank you for being so insightful as to express them so well. It echoes some of my higgledy piggledy career, and I too have found how amazing it is that we can get much joy from a new (and sometimes unimagined) situation if we only open our minds to the positives it can bring.

[Reply](#)

Terry McGlynn

October 14, 2013 at 11:59 pm

Thanks so much for this. I really look forward to hearing more about you as a researcher in the context of a liberal arts college.

[Reply](#)

aQuestion

October 15, 2013 at 12:59 am

I am finishing a postdoc, and heading off to a tenure-track position at an LAC in a couple months. Last year, I applied for three jobs, got one interview, and one job offer. While I am excited about certain aspects about working at this LAC, I am also beginning to get frustrated by lack of resources compared to the R1 institutions where I have been trained.

Last week, a colleague from an R1 institution called me up and said that someone is leaving in their department, and she would like to put my name in for the position. Is saying “yes” to this question a bad choice in this scenario? In some ways I feel like it would be an opportunity to advance my career