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A Research Career at a Liberal-Arts College

By Kristen Ghodsee

Like most graduate students finishing their Ph.D.'s and facing an unpredictable job market, I applied to every position for which I was even remotely qualified -- some of them at places I had never heard of.

One job I applied for was at Bowdoin College, a small liberal-arts institution in Maine, well known in the East but less so at the University of California at Berkeley, where I was earning a Ph.D. in social and cultural studies from 1996 to 2002. I was delighted when Bowdoin flew me out for an interview and offered me a tenure-track job in early December -- well before most of the other departments had even made their short lists.

The department offered me a competitive salary and a teaching load of two courses a semester, comparable to what I would expect at a major research university, as well as a generous pot of start-up money and the promise of a one-year sabbatical after my third year on the tenure track.

Despite the attractiveness of the offer, many of my professors and fellow students at Berkeley scoffed at the idea that I would accept a post at a liberal-arts college. It was considered an acceptable choice only if none of the jobs at research universities came through.

Over and over, I heard that liberal-arts colleges were merely teaching institutions. My research aspirations would be prematurely smothered under an avalanche of needy undergraduates, and my intellect irreversibly dulled by the proximity to an unproductive cadre of permanent associate professors. Liberal-arts colleges did not have the resources to support serious scholarship, I was told, and their focus on teaching would skew my creative energies in the "wrong" direction.

Doubtful, I placed a few calls to mentors and friends at other major universities. The diagnosis was almost unanimous: academic death.

It was only my dissertation adviser who seemed to think that a tenure-track job (even at a liberal-arts college) was better than a postdoc or an adjunct position and opined that "it is easier to get a job when you already have one." He was sure I could avoid the liberal-arts "trap" so long as I kept publishing and actively continued to attend national conferences to stay in touch with major scholars in my field.

Perennially risk-averse, and faced with the bird-in-the-hand versus two-in-the-bush dilemma, I decided to take the job.

Ultimately I did get the chance to leave for the supposed promised land of a Research I university. Instead I stayed. I stayed because I realized that most of the advice I had been given

as a graduate student was just plain wrong. I believe the general disdain for the liberal-arts college that I heard back in 2001 is alive and well today, preventing aspiring researchers from even considering positions at such institutions.

Granted, the quality of liberal-arts colleges varies quite dramatically. Indeed, the crushing teaching burden that is a fact of academic life at many lesser-ranked colleges is largely responsible for their declassé reputation among academics at elite research universities. Furthermore, in the physical sciences, where expensive lab equipment and an army of willing graduate students are sometimes necessary, liberal-arts colleges may have some significant limitations.

Last, for those who find any type of classroom engagement an unbearably onerous chore, even teaching small classes of extremely bright and motivated undergraduates might be enough to throw them into a permanent state of cerebral paralysis.

But my experience, and that of many of my colleagues in the humanities and social sciences, is that the best liberal-arts institutions are, in fact, more conducive to junior-faculty research than some of their Research I counterparts.

In the first place, many small private colleges have generous faculty-research funds; the abundance of internal money available means that junior scholars can pursue ambitious scholarly agendas without constantly seeking (and waiting for) external grants. That's especially helpful if your research, like mine, requires international travel.

Leave policy is also flexible at many small colleges. Several of my colleagues and I have enjoyed two years of sabbatical leave before going up for tenure -- something I have been told would never be allowed at many larger universities.

In the long term, the lack of graduate students may be undesirable for those who hope to academically reproduce themselves. But in the short term, not having graduate students frees up a lot of time for junior professors to work on their own research instead of, say, reading drafts of other people's dissertations.

Finally, small colleges are often more collegial than huge universities. Some people thrive on the cut-throat competition of the bigger university, but I work better in an atmosphere in which I know that one assistant professor's success will not inspire either envy or malice among other junior faculty members competing for a limited number of tenured spots.

Speaking to colleagues at similar institutions, I realized that my circumstances were not an aberration.

"Williams [College] certainly makes it clear that research matters, and it puts its money where its mouth is," says Olga Shevchenko, an assistant professor of sociology there. "In addition to the possibility for three semesters of 'assistant professor' leave, it has a yearly research fund for every faculty member to cover journal subscriptions and minor research expenses; a fair amount of discretionary funds that can be assigned as 'seed money' for new research, plus a good number

of in-house grants and stipends, which are competitive but explicitly designed to help finance research."

True, she acknowledged, research assistance may be found wanting because of the lack of graduate students. "But even here," she said, "you can get a research student assistant for the summer through a program that pays them directly, and usually it is the brightest and the best students that apply for these, and I would argue that the quality of their work is not lower than that of your average grad student."

Bruce Grant, a professor of anthropology who spent his early career at Swarthmore College, also points out that there is less "service teaching" at small colleges, which allows junior faculty members to teach their own research interests. He pointed to the "often greater freedoms of a liberal-arts college, which has a lesser claim to 'complete' coverage and therefore fewer curriculum committees. This means that courses could shift from one year to the next based on changing faculty-research profiles."

In my own case, as a result of a low teaching load, generous internal grants, and two years of junior leave to take advantage of external fellowships, I was able to do the research and writing for a second book and several peer-reviewed journal articles. I successfully came up for tenure in my sixth year.

My publication record should be a testament to the support that top liberal-arts colleges give to junior professors. But it is all too common for colleagues at research universities and well-meaning mentors to refer to me as "underplaced" -- that most backhanded of compliments. I am also dismayed when assistant professors at research universities, struggling to find a few free moments to revise their dissertations, condescendingly inquire if I am disappointed not to have graduate students. They still believe that liberal-arts colleges are, by definition, anathema to active research and publication.

Inevitably, it seems, faculty members at research institutions assume that those of us at liberal-arts colleges are stifled by too much teaching and by a general lack of mental stimulation -- that we would jump at the opportunity to leave the small college life for the thrills of the big university.

But the truth is, some of those universities offer comparatively lower salaries, less generous leave policies, fewer internal resources, more service commitments, larger bureaucracies, and, when graduate advising is considered, higher teaching and mentoring commitments. In exchange for those considerably poorer labor conditions, many universities proffer the cachet of being at a Research I, the highest totem on the status pole of academe.

But for serious scholars committed to living in the world of ideas, the ability to carve out of one's professional obligations enough time for reading, thinking, and writing should be the true measure of whether an institution is conducive to research -- and not simply whether it is called a "research" institution.

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