TRAVEL SECTION

In this installment of the travel section, we explore the life of social and personality psychologists at teaching colleges.

Being Teacher-Scholars in a Liberal Arts Setting

By Kathryn C. Oleson, Reed College and Carolyn Weisz,
University of Puget Sound

Sunshine has returned to the Pacific Northwest, giving the small, private liberal arts colleges here the look of a resort or summer camp, and fitting nicely within the theme of Dialogue’s “Travel Section.” Many people – rightly or wrongly – assume that they already know what it would be like to work in such a setting. Some imagine that it is a smaller version of a larger university - often interpreted, therefore, as less stressful or demanding. Such perceptions, however, are misguided and can be damaging for candidates on the job market or for their well-meaning advisors. In this piece we’ll try to give you a realistic sense of our lives as teacher-scholars in liberal arts settings. Whereas previous travel columns have considered differences between being faculty members in a psychology department versus other settings (e.g., marketing department, polling firm), our task is different in that we are writing about being social psychologists in a psychology department - but within a liberal arts college instead of a larger institution that trains graduate students. Instead of contrasting the two, we focus on what it is like to be a social psychologist in a liberal arts setting and consider what factors might make it a more or less good fit for someone. As a caveat, our comments are primarily based on our own experiences at Reed College and the University of Puget Sound, which may only loosely resemble positions at other liberal arts institutions.

**Teacher-Scholar.** One’s identity in a liberal arts setting is as a teacher-scholar. Being a teacher-scholar involves a commitment to engaging undergraduate courses in the learning process and helping them develop important skills in writing, research, and critical thinking. In addition, it assumes an active and engaged research program that develops one’s social-psychological research identity, involves students in conducting research, and informs and enhances one’s teaching. Faculty members are therefore expected to be excellent teachers and excellent scholars. At both of our institutions, promotion and tenure require meeting high standards for teaching excellence; if one is not an excellent teacher who loves to teach undergraduates, a liberal arts environment would likely be a poor fit. At the same time, lack of quality research engagement would be seen as problematic because of its harm to both the researcher and his or her ability to teach first-rate courses. Ideally, one finds a balance and synergy between teaching and research such that, by being an active and engaged researcher and an active and engaged teacher, both one’s teaching and research are enriched. The line between teacher and researcher is often blurred, as is the case when one is teaching the research process through collaborating with a student on a senior thesis or independent study project.

**Teaching.** Teaching high-quality undergraduate courses that promote students’ development as scholars is an intensive activity. Like first-rate research and writing, it involves focused time, hard work, and creativity. Few, if any, courses are large lectures with multiple choice exams. Instead most classes involve teaching the writing of lab reports, research proposals, or term papers; conducting hands-on research; reading original research; and guiding animated discussions of class readings. Given the amount of writing students do, there are frequently piles of papers to grade and rarely or never the help of a teaching assistant. Teaching a 2/2, 2/3, or 3/3 course-load is time-consuming. The types of courses one offers may in part be limited by the fact you are the only person in the department with particular expertise. You may, however, be able to offer upper-level specialty seminars that serve to bring students into your research lab. There are additional benefits to teaching in this environment. Knowing students’ names by the second week of class creates a sense of camaraderie which quickly grows into shared expectations that both students and instructor will contribute to the vitality of the learning environment. Having colleagues, within and outside of psychology, who share a commitment to teaching is also a joy. Such colleagues serve as a practical resource and support network. Moreover, we both find that conversations with peers about teaching are a stimulating source of intellectual engagement. Both of our institutions promote effective teaching through a variety of means such as brown bag discussions, workshops led by visiting scholars, and evaluation processes that ensure we receive regular and thorough feedback from students and peers.

**Research.** There are challenges to conducting research in a liberal arts setting. First, there are not graduate students or postdocs, and you may be the only scholar in your sub-area of psychology. Instead, your collaborators are undergraduates – often whip-smart, motivated undergraduates who are a delight to work with and who appreciate one-on-one mentoring – but still undergraduates who may only be able to commit 1-2 semesters to your lab and who are clearly beginners. Second, there is limited time for research during the school
year. Clearly we can point to folks with high research productivity in liberal arts settings; however, individuals who pursue positions at liberal arts colleges should assume that most of their time during the academic year will be focused on high-quality teaching. Third, there is often no subject pool, or if there is one, it is small. Finally, some research may demand a different type of setting, such as projects that entail technical procedures that take months or years to learn, necessitate specific populations (e.g., for which a medical school would be helpful), or require access to an fMRI scanner. In some settings, there may be resources or strategies one can use to help confront these challenges. For instance, liberal arts colleges often have small pools of money to support faculty research, summer research opportunities, and student-centered research projects. Collaborations with faculty at other institutions can provide access to larger subject pools. On the positive side, collaborative research with undergraduates can be extremely gratifying. At Reed, for instance, where all students are required to conduct senior theses, many faculty members find that working closely with students in developing their thesis projects is one of the most intellectually rewarding parts of being a teacher-scholar. Another advantage of conducting research in a liberal arts setting is that there may be a high degree of scholarly freedom to work outside of one’s specific subfield, take interdisciplinary perspectives, or explore “risky” questions. Many liberal arts institutions value the role that faculty scholarship plays in their larger educational missions, rather than as a tool to attract graduate students or compete for external funding. For example, one of us has ditched the experimental lab for several years to collect messy data on experiences of stigma among individuals who are homeless. This type of research offers opportunities that are valuable for undergraduates but could prove problematic for training graduate students seeking mainstream social psychology positions.

Service. In a small department within a small college, each individual’s service is important. The department is a 6- to 10-person team in which each person is a critical link. If you have a chain of individuals with great generosity of spirit, the department thrives. But if individuals contribute little to the life of the department and institution, the community suffers. Your mere presence on campus may be valued or expected. In our departments, most faculty members are in their offices on most days, though some carve out part or all of a day to work from home. Moreover, as with any small team or a family, one needs to develop skills to cope with personality differences and potential conflicts. It is both a blessing and a curse that service activities, small and large, make a difference. These include department meetings, curriculum reviews, advising students, and shaking hands with parents at graduation receptions. You might, soon after tenure, be asked to be Department Head (both of us were), and sooner or later you may take your turn making decisions about the tenure of faculty across the college, helping your institution through its accreditation process, or chairing the IRB or professional standards committee. Service related to supporting under-represented students and diversity efforts is also important at liberal arts institutions, where there may be small numbers of students of color and where some student organizations may have few allies. Moreover, as the only social psychologist on staff, you might be uniquely able to share expertise on topics like stereotype threat and intergroup anxiety in order to improve the educational climate. At both our institutions, we are frequently reminded that service activities of the major sort can and should wax and wane throughout one’s career. Saying no, and resisting interesting service opportunities, however, can be difficult.

Liberal Arts Setting - A Good Fit? Neither of us was trained in a liberal arts institution, or, in all honesty, knew this is where we’d end up at the time we interviewed for our current jobs. Having spent almost 30 years (collectively) at liberal arts institutions, however, we have experience and knowledge to help others discern whether the teacher-scholar model might be a good fit. Our analysis above suggests a good fit for those who love teaching and learning, whose research can be conducted with undergraduate collaborators, who function well in small groups, who can juggle multiple roles and responsibilities, and who enjoy forging connections across communities. That said, one’s fit with a particular liberal arts setting might depend on a number of factors that vary across positions such as teaching load, lab facilities, expectations for service and research productivity, characteristics of students, and the location of the institution. A liberal arts setting isn’t a spa, but, if you are lucky, every 7 years you may get a sabbatical!