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In School for Life

By Travis J. Ryan

A first-year professor adjusts to the transition from student to faculty member.

As I entered the campus food court, the cashier called out, “Hon’, the computers are down, so you won’t be able to use your student ID to pay for your food. You’ll have to use cash, OK?”

During the last year, I have become quite used to being mistaken for a student. Once, in the bookstore, I asked for the faculty discount on my purchase, and was asked in return what faculty member I was buying the books for. On another occasion, a bookseller appeared in my office and after reading the nameplate on my door, asked where she could find Dr. Ryan. I informed her that she had found him. Her response: “Ohmigod — you’re a baby!!”

I was back in the food court a few weeks later, standing in line, when a student walked past and commented, smiling, “Trying to fit in with the students, eh?” I laughed and as he passed, I thought to myself that if I was, it obviously was not working well enough to fool him.

Mine can be a somewhat awkward position: **young enough to be mistaken for a student by older members of the university community, but not so young as to confuse the students themselves.** Perhaps this is only fitting for someone making the transition from student to faculty. A small price to pay, methinks, for getting to stay in school for life.

I think there is a distinction to be made regarding being “in” school and being “enrolled” in school. Being in school is to be attending classes in an ongoing process of edification and erudition. This is a life characterized by ample time for reflection, contemplation and lofty photo-in-the-university-catalogue pursuits, such as tossing a Frisbee on verdant lawns in the shade of stately buildings named after wealthy benefactors.

Being enrolled in school, on the other hand, is an altogether different prospect. The phrase brings forth images of just trying to make the grade: reading endless textbook chapters filled with terse prose, studying long hours for exams, and writing half-hearted papers, with barely enough time for anything approaching reflection or contemplation. It is a sad fact of life that being in school usually necessitates being enrolled in school.

From the time I first entered college, my plan has been to remain in school as long as possible. Accordingly, when I finished my bachelor’s degree, I promptly began work on a master’s degree, which led directly to a doctorate. By the time the final sheepskin was hanging on the wall, the entire decade of the ’90s (plus a wee bit of the late ’80s and the very early ’00s) had passed. Knowing that I was well suited for being in school and little else, I took the next step in the academic life cycle and joined the faculty.

The transition from student to faculty member has been rather gradual in many respects. For example, the first duty of the faculty

Travis Ryan (far left) helps ecology students Jess Anderson and Wes Aniton examine plant and animal life in a campus pond.

is to teach, and although I am new faculty, I am hardly a new teacher. In fact, I have been teaching in one form or another for the majority of my time in higher education, beginning as a tutor and lab assistant for the chemistry department during my junior and senior years of college. My only qualification at that point — I wasn't even majoring in chemistry — was that I had previously made an "A" in the course I tutored.

Teaching became a bigger part of my life once I entered graduate school. I earned my living as a teaching assistant while I worked on my master's and doctorate. Teaching assistantships are the conventional means of financial compensation for graduate students in the natural sciences. Under this system, graduate students earn their keep by teaching laboratories and introductory courses while completing their research.

Later in my graduate career, I was awarded a research fellowship, which allowed me to devote all of my time to research. However, I knew that there is a premium on teaching experience when applying for jobs in academia. **Before long, the practical and economic considerations had me back in the classroom again, teaching part time at a small state university.**

During those seemingly interminable student years, teaching was on the periphery of my daily endeavors. It was always there, but it was almost always my last priority. Now that I am no longer enrolled in school, teaching has moved to the front and center of my professional life so that I may remain in school. And while my training has prepared me well for teaching, it doesn't necessarily mean that I was particularly well prepared to become a member of the faculty.

From the outside, teaching in academia appears a pretty cushy job. Just look at the schedule. I teach two classes a term. I meet each class for an hour a day, and then once a week for a three-hour lab. Our department has a weekly faculty meeting, and I have set aside three office hours each week where students can drop by to discuss the course or whatever else may be on their minds. That's a grand total of 20 hours of work each week. Summers are off, not to mention the spring break, Easter, Thanksgiving and winter holidays. It seems that there would be plenty of time for verdant lawns, throwing discs and the like.

But there's an awful lot that goes into being on the faculty that falls outside those first 20 hours of the week. With that in mind, here's a list of the things they don't tell you when you opt for the full-time teaching gig:

- It takes anywhere from two to four hours to write a brand new lecture. Of course, this preparation time will go down after a while (I hope!), but I am still new at it.

- I am pretty sure that I spend more time writing my exams than some of my students spend studying for them. I know with certainty that I spend more time grading an exam than they spend thinking about it once they have answered the last question.

- Office hours are only the start of being available to students. I usually manage to drop what I am doing if someone stops in, and I make appointments to suit their schedules. I return e-mails and phone calls (less frequently) on weekends and well after hours.

I believe in the mission of liberal arts education, and thus I chose to work in an institution that emphasizes undergraduate education. This gives teaching clear precedence in my activities, with everything else falling in place behind it.

But while it is the priority, teaching is not the end-all be-all. I am also an active research ecologist, which means I must find time to pursue funding, conduct research, write papers, and stay current in the research being done by others in my field. Being a member of the academic community carries additional professional responsibilities as well, such as refereeing journal articles, editing book chapters and reviewing grant proposals. When I look at my "To Do" list and compare it to my "To Do" time, I can only sigh and lament that they only put 24 hours in a day.

Although my move to full-time teaching has been a more-or-less gentle gradation, other aspects of the transition from student to faculty were abrupt. **It seems as though in a single day — the first day of classes during my first term last fall, to be exact — I was suddenly "Dr. Ryan" rather than "Travis."**

On average, I am only 10 years older than most of my students, and we clearly belong to the same generation, sharing a common set of cultural landmarks. This can be a clear advantage for me in the classroom. And it is simple for me to recall being enrolled in school and the trappings that accompany that stage of life. In their evaluations of my teaching performance, many students list my ability to relate to them as one of my strengths. Exactly how relating to them enhances their understanding of general biology remains a mystery to me, but they seem to think enough of it to list it.

I have quickly come to understand that being a professor at a liberal arts college is no 40-hour-a-week-punch-the-time-clock-pick-up-your-pay-check job. It is more a way of life. And at the core of it must be a passionate love of learning. That love of learning should drive the desire to teach. It not only keeps me in school, it keeps me on both sides of the lectern.

With my official student-hood less than a year behind me, I find myself still seated among the students. During winter term and again in the spring, I audited a course in the philosophy department. When I look at my schedule — marked by a full-time teaching load, some modest research activity and some writing, to speak nothing of my growing family (four children) at home — I tell myself I can ill-afford to add another commitment. But also, how can I not? I am compelled to take advantage of being surrounded by scholars who are quite willing and able to teach. Thus I find myself still attending classes when I can. I will confess, however, that I am not so zealous that I take all the exams and write all the term papers. While I am still *in* school, I'd just as soon never be *enrolled* in school again, thank you very much.

The career I have selected rarely leads to fame or fortune, and virtually never the two simultaneously. **It does, however, allow me to continue filling my head and satisfying my curiosity. More importantly, it charges me with the responsibility of helping others do the same.** And while the demands on my time are considerable, teaching provides me with more flexibility in structuring my daily activities than most other professions allow.

And while I haven't exactly worked Frisbee into my schedule, I haven't given up hope yet. I am still in school, after all. 🍇

Travis Ryan holds bachelor's and master's degrees from Western Carolina University and a Ph.D. from the University of Missouri. Having completed a one-year appointment in the Furman biology department, he has accepted a tenure-track position at Butler University in Indianapolis, Ind., beginning this fall.