

Teaching-Focused Jobs— How to Find What Suits You Best

Sarah Mayes-Tang

You have decided that you would like a career focused on teaching. Congratulations! It's an engaging, fun, and rewarding career, but finding a position that is right for you can be a challenge.

I know firsthand how different teaching-focused positions can be. For the first four years of my career I was a continuing faculty member at Quest University Canada, a young liberal arts institution with less than 700 students. After four years at Quest, I accepted a job as an assistant professor (teaching stream) at the University of Toronto, a large research institution where I oversee courses with thousands of students. Teaching positions vary more than research positions, and many institutions are changing how they hire, promote, and retain new teaching staff. My current institution, for example, introduced teaching stream professorial ranks only in 2015.

There is no one “best” teaching position: different positions are right for different people at different times. This column is framed around questions that can help you figure out what is best for you.

What Level and Type of Students Do You Want to Teach?

When I began my teaching career, I knew that I wanted to work with students who—if given the choice—would never take a math course. One of the reasons that I sought a position at Quest is because about half of my courses would be distribution requirements. In other positions, you might teach only math and science majors with strong math backgrounds. Also consider what level of math you want to teach: will you be satisfied in a career where you teach only introductory-level courses? While most teaching positions do not include graduate-level course teaching, you may work with graduate students who are training to be instructors or teaching assistants.

How Much Research Do You Want to Do? What Type of Research Do You Want to Do?

Many teaching-focused positions maintain some expectation of “scholarly activity,” but the amount and type of work that is required, supported, and rewarded can be all

over the map. Some positions expect that you only stay in touch with the literature and attend conferences, while others require a solid publishing record very close to what is expected of research-focused professors. It is important that you think about where you want your scholarly activity to go in the short term and the long term. Also consider whether you would like to do research in math, education, or other areas. If you are interested in pursuing interdisciplinary research, for example, you want to ensure that you are at an institution that will support this type of scholarship and recognize it.

Do You Want the Opportunity to Design Courses? Or, Are You Focused on Delivery?

If you want to do a significant amount of course design you will want to find a job where you are not only permitted to propose and design your own courses but where the culture of the department and institution will support this type of work.

What Do You Want Your Daily, Weekly, and Yearly Schedules to Look Like?

The total number of courses that you teach over the course of the year is one metric to consider. The impact of your teaching on family, research, and vacation plans will depend on how your teaching is distributed. Faculty members who do all of their teaching in one semester will have very different work lives than those who teach through every single semester. Likewise, the flow of your life will depend on the weeks in an academic semester, the break between semesters, how classes are scheduled throughout the week, and the length of a typical class period.

What Part Do You Want to Play in Your Department or Institution as a Whole?

At teaching-focused institutions faculty are often at the very heart of the student experience, leading undergraduate research projects, carrying out administrative activities, and leading a plethora of other initiatives. When I was at Quest I had the opportunity to lead university-level initiatives, even though I was at the very beginning of my career. At other institutions, some people still see faculty who have chosen a teaching-focused career as “lesser” than research-focused faculty. This attitude might prevent you from taking on leadership roles at any point in your career.

How do you tell what role you might play in an institution? In addition to speaking with current faculty members you can look for evidence of institutional attitudes: What is offered in terms of research grants, salary and benefits? Are they profiled in news releases and on websites? Is there the same level of job security?

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Do You Want to Teach Large Classes or Small Classes? Do You Have the Skills to Coordinate Large Teaching Teams?

While many people would instantly say small classes are best, I have found large and small class teaching equally satisfying and each has its own benefits. I have found that the pedagogical and course design skills required are both quite similar for large and small class teaching. It is the less discussed skills—administrative skills to teach huge classes and the emotional support skills in small classes—that really distinguish these two experiences.

While beginning teaching assignments are usually clear, you should also ask about future opportunities and expectations. At some institutions, you will be hired to teach or coordinate a single course for the foreseeable future, or you will be asked to teach only introductory courses. At others you might teach one section of six different courses, with little continuity from year to year.

What Support Will You Need for Professional Activities?

You should consider the costs of maintaining a research program and staying in touch with your mathematical communities. You will likely require more financial support than you first expect. I found that when I went from a graduate program at a large research university to a small and somewhat isolated setting I needed to travel much more to keep in touch with the broader mathematical world. Also, registration costs for conferences were high, and I was often paying a full “professor” rate for many conferences instead of the “postdoctoral scholar” rate that many other early career colleagues paid, not to mention the US-Canadian exchange rate. The location of your institution matters too: costs will depend on whether you are near a central air hub or if there are many professional activities occurring. While travel is often the most expensive item, computer equipment and books should also factor into this.

Consider library resources available. Smaller institutions often have access to fewer books and papers than research institutions. Interlibrary loan programs can help you gain access to additional materials, but a wait of even a few days can stall your research.

You might also consider access to students (undergraduate or graduate) to help further your scholarship. Many universities support student research by offering research assistantship funding, but sometimes teaching-focused faculty do not have access to these programs.

How Much Stability Do You Need?

Historically, teaching-focused jobs have often not had the stability of tenure. You should consider your level of comfort with the contract length and contract renewal process. When looking at particular positions, find out as much as you can about how contract renewals or tenure review processes are handled. What is the success rate of

people who enter the process? Is there support for preparing your applications? You should also consider potential life changes: while you might be confident in your ability to pour your entire self into your job now, you might feel differently when care responsibilities increase or when your energy level changes.

What Else?

Finally, you should make the usual job considerations, including salary, flexibility, work culture, and location. While the application processes and considerations can be overwhelming, staying focused on what you need to be successful and why you are choosing a teaching-focused career will allow you to navigate this time with confidence and excitement for the opportunities that lie ahead!



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Credits

Author photo is courtesy of the author.

Non-Tenure-Track Teaching Faculty in Research Departments

Hanna Bennett and Rebecca Swanson

Non-tenure-track positions are becoming increasingly common in academia. The American Association of University Professors states that in 2016, 73% of instructional positions in academia were off the tenure track [1]. In a 2017 *Chronicle* article that provided an analysis of a study done by the Government Accountability Office on these positions, one of the takeaways was that “freshly minted academics are apt to wind up with jobs off the tenure track” [2]. Both

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