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What's Your Philosophy on Teaching, and Does it Matter?

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SPOTLIGHT

Career trends
and features

Since last fall, Peter J. Alaimo has applied for 25 academic positions -- all of them at four-year colleges and universities. In every instance, he's been asked to submit a statement explaining his philosophy of teaching.

"I don't think I saw an ad that didn't ask for one," says Mr. Alaimo, a postdoctoral fellow of chemical biology at the University of California at San Francisco.

At a growing number of institutions, departments are asking job candidates to include statements of teaching philosophy in their application packets. But many applicants say they feel at sea when they try to write one. And members of hiring committees say the statements are merely a way to send a message about the importance of teaching but are rarely a deciding, or even serious, factor in the hiring process.

If they are a deciding factor, the statements are more likely to hurt a candidacy than to help it. "It's not only a job-application hoop to jump through," says Bill Pannacker, an assistant professor of English at Hope College in Michigan. "but another potential stumbling block. Someone on the hiring committee could use the document to weed you out of the competition over some philosophical issue that may have no real bearing on the kind of teaching you do."

Candidates have no way of knowing how their statements will be used in the hiring process; for them, the main difficulty is just writing one. "It was definitely the hardest part of the application for me to put together," says Megan Frost, a Ph.D. candidate in chemistry at the University of Michigan who is on the academic job market. (For advice on how to write a teaching statement, and a list of dos and don'ts, [click here.](#))

Most Ph.D.'s are produced by research universities, but most academic job openings are at teaching-oriented institutions, says Gene C. Fant Jr., chairman of the English department at Union University. That disjuncture is driving search committees at many institutions -- especially liberal-arts colleges, comprehensive state universities, evangelical colleges, and community colleges -- to ask applicants for their philosophy on teaching.

He finds the statements useful in the search. "Some employers have had really bad experiences with people who are good researchers and lousy teachers," Mr. Fant says. Statements of teaching philosophy provide a way to weed out people who aren't committed to teaching or who are only interested in working at a four-year university or community college because they didn't get a job at a Research I, he says.

"We had a couple of searches last year [at Mississippi College], and it was one of the things we really looked at," says Mr. Fant, who was chairman of the English department there at the time. "We threw out the applications that lacked good statements, and then, when we had our finalists, we really pored over their teaching philosophies. We actually had them on the table in front of us when we were interviewing candidates, and we asked them questions based on their statements."

At small, private, liberal-arts colleges, such statements are more likely to make or break someone's candidacy, says Andrew Green, a Ph.D. counselor in the Career Center at the University of California at Berkeley. "The major selling point of those colleges is that students will be taught by cutting-edge professionals in an intimate setting, rather than in a lecture hall where they're one of hundreds of students."

But not every institution takes these teaching statements so seriously.

"I can't think of a single time when we used a teaching philosophy to rule somebody out," says Brian Wilson, chairman of the department of comparative religion at Western Michigan University. "Western is very interested in building its graduate programs and retaining its Carnegie status as a research-intensive university, so the ethos here is really that research and writing are probably the most important things a person brings. Teaching is a close second, and nobody discounts that, but if we see potential for teaching, then we think this is a person who can be nurtured and taught."

Even at colleges that rely heavily on the statements, some academics are skeptical of their value.

Michael Westmoreland, an associate professor of mathematics at Ohio's Denison University, doesn't think they are a good tool for diagnosing the teaching potential of applicants. "If it were up to me, I wouldn't ask for statements of teaching philosophy, because I've yet to have an experience in which a statement gave me any information, unlike other things in the packet," he says.

The problem, some professors say, is there's an absence of criteria about what constitutes a good teaching statement, not to mention good teaching. In fact, few professors were able to give concrete examples of what they considered a bad statement, but most said they knew one when they saw it.

"I'm not so sure we really know what we're looking for when we ask for teaching philosophies," says Joanna Bosse, an assistant professor of ethnomusicology at Bowdoin College. "I certainly struggled with mine. In fact I don't think I've ever succeeded in writing a very good statement of teaching philosophy. The job that I got was one that I didn't have to write one for, so that may be indicative of the kind of larger problem with it."

You can tell that someone is a good researcher if they have an established research record, but it's much harder to evaluate them as a teacher until you've seen them in action, says Richard Lundgren, a professor of mathematics at the University of Colorado at Denver. "Teaching excellence requires more than reflecting on what it takes to be a good teacher. You really won't know how good a teacher they are until you hire them and see how it goes at your particular institution with the mix of students that you have."

So do critics see any value to these statements? Mr. Lundgren says requiring applicants to write them does send a signal about the importance of teaching. "It's a gesture to say that we value teaching," agrees Mr. Pannacker of Hope College. "But it's not only for the candidate. I think it's internally as

well, so that the faculty who are primarily teaching faculty, rather than research faculty, feel validated and included in the hiring process."

To Mr. Westmoreland, a candidate's teaching statement is really just an indication of whether he or she is thinking seriously about the teaching aspects of the job.

Some professors argue that asking job applicants to produce teaching philosophies is premature. Young Ph.D.'s, fresh from the research-intensive training of their doctoral programs, may be least prepared to write cogently on their philosophy about teaching.

"I find it a puzzling thing to ask a beginner to produce," says Deborah Ball, a professor of education at the University of Michigan. "As a veteran elementary teacher, I would have to work hard to try to represent what I think and try to do, but I cannot really see how the beginning teachers with whom I work could do this well yet."

Ms. Bosse agrees. It makes more sense to use a statement of teaching philosophy in the tenure process, because "at that point you're in a particular job with a certain kind of student body and a certain set of goals that are tailored to individuals, so you have a specific context in which to discuss your teaching."

In fact, teaching statements are becoming a common component in the dossiers of junior professors up for promotion. Barbara Bowers, a professor of nursing and chairwoman of the social-studies divisional committee at the University of Wisconsin at Madison says her committee requires them.

"We view it as a tool to encourage faculty members to improve their teaching early in their careers," she says. "We used to think people were born good teachers -- you either are or you aren't -- and we know now that's not true. People can learn to be good teachers. So the purpose of the teaching statement is to be self-reflective, to identify where you might need some help from others, or you might need to do a little more work on your own to improve, and to look at which of your strategies are effective and which ones aren't."

Where job candidates typically write a page-long statement, at the tenure level, the document is longer -- perhaps three to five pages or more. It serves as an abstract that's going to have evidence -- sample examinations, syllabi, course evaluations -- appended to it, says Brian Coppola, a chemistry professor at the University of Michigan. "It's really a Rosetta Stone for the dossier that's being presented" related to teaching.

For example, it may help the committee to put a candidate's course evaluations into context. "We realize that it's nice for teachers to get good reviews from students, but, in fact, sometimes teachers who get mixed reviews may actually be better teachers," says Ms. Bowers. "Maybe they're less entertaining, but a bit more demanding. Reviewing a candidate's statement of teaching philosophy may help us to see what's really happening."

However, many professors say that a teaching statement is unlikely to make or break a faculty member's tenure case. "There are so many other factors to consider," says Mr. Pannacker of Hope College. "I think a teaching statement is pretty low down on the scale. There's your publications record, student-teacher evaluations, annual reports from department chairs, and they're likely to weigh much more heavily." By contrast, in the hiring process, he says, the statement might be more influential because "there's less material to look at. The teaching statement is one out of maybe 10 pages or so of

material, whereas a tenure candidate's dossier is as thick as a book."

Like many job candidates, Mr. Alaimo of UCSF has mixed feelings about statements of teaching philosophy. He's been on 10 interviews so far, and he believes he wouldn't have landed them if not for his teaching statement, which he worked on for two months. "Coming from a major research institution, I don't think I would have gotten the interviews at four-year colleges had I not had what I hope is a pretty good statement of teaching philosophy." Even so, he says the next time around he'll spend less time on his statement and more time on things that are more likely to be pivotal in the hiring process: "I have the sense that the teaching philosophy is sort of this wishy-washy document, and it's really not clear how anyone uses it."

Academics may disagree on the importance of teaching statements, but they agree on one thing: Even if you're not asked for such a statement in the hiring process, you should write one.

"It's worth having," says UC-Berkeley's Mr. Green, even if it isn't pivotal in a search. At some point in the job-search or tenure process, he adds, "the issue of what you do in the classroom is going to come to the fore, and you need to be prepared to discuss it in a coherent manner."

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