

Experiences and Challenges: Reflections on Making the Transition from Graduate Student to Professor¹

**By Brian E. Power
Department of Music, Brock University**

If the passage from graduate student to music professor can be likened to a journey, then the road is rarely an unswerving one. It is usually fraught with obstacles and turns, mostly unforeseen. Moreover, the traveler does not always arrive at the originally intended destination and, even when this goal is accomplished, it rarely seems to be by means of the planned route! This paper is a reflection on some of the twists in my own journey, some of the signposts I discovered en route, and perhaps on the modicum of prudence a seasoned traveler will eventually gain after falling into many a pothole.

Unless one is extremely fortunate, the road to an academic position will be littered with rejection letters. I have a theory that, particularly with smaller, primarily undergraduate programs, the principal reason for the rejection of an applicant boils down to one thing: teaching experience. After all, a promising and published scholar will be of limited use to a small department if this person cannot teach effectively. Since most job advertisements at the Assistant Professor level seem to be coming from such institutions, it

stands to reason that training and experience as a classroom instructor should figure prominently in one's graduate school education.

Yet, the reality of many respected graduate programs is one of unceasing commitment to study, research, writing, peer exchange, and guidance from senior faculty. Little time is left in the schedule of a dedicated full-time graduate student for the development of skills in the education of undergraduates, nor are the opportunities for garnering experience in this field always available. The position of graduate teaching assistant is of course an exception. Still, by its very nature, a T.A. position implies that you have served in the role of assistant, not master, in the classroom. It does not necessarily demonstrate much exposure to students in a lecture situation. Rather, you have served as a leader of a small tutorial, the subject matter and even the lesson plan of which have been determined by the professor. Teaching assistants rarely seem to have the opportunity to have an impact on course design. Thus they miss out on a vital experience, the difficulties and challenges of

¹This article is based on a paper presented at a panel discussion entitled "Preparing Future Music Professors for University Teaching: Issues and Strategies," at the annual conference of the Canadian University Music Society, Université Laval, Québec, May 25, 2001. I am grateful to my fellow panelists for their papers and a stimulating discussion: Anna Hoefnagels (York University, now at Augustana University College), who organized and chaired the panel, Roberta Lamb (Queen's University), and James Deaville (McMaster University).

which are thrust upon them all too heavily in their first professorial position.

Knowing this, search committees scrutinizing a *curriculum vitae* may well look for evidence of the candidate's experience as an instructor, where the applicant has had the full responsibility of directing a class. Such positions are not rare, particularly in the current economic climate where many institutions are eager to hire teaching faculty on a part-time, no-benefits, no-strings-attached basis. The irony is that a candidate who can show substantial evidence of instructor experience has usually had to sacrifice other things to achieve it, including the timely completion of his or her Ph.D. dissertation, which itself is often a condition for full-time employment in academia. No pat solution exists for this paradox. My experience has been that the combination of a soon-to-be-completed Ph.D. with a proven track record of teaching is of more immediate value to an undergraduate department than a completed thesis accompanied by little or no exposure to students in a classroom setting. Keeping a current dossier of any teaching materials you have prepared in the past, as well as a statement of your teaching philosophy, will save you much time when preparing a job application, and may well place you high in the running for a position.

Many additional challenges face the newly-minted professor who has managed successfully to negotiate the gauntlet of the job interview and gain that much-sought-after full-time position. Some of these are particularly acute when the move has been from a large research institution to a small teaching school. The most basic and necessary change in mindset seems obvious. Yet, its necessity often

becomes evident only in the first year of full-time teaching. Most of a graduate student's time and energy has been spent in a comparatively narrow research field: there are no generic dissertations! But a professor at a small school has to teach in subject areas that frequently have no relation to the person's area of expertise. In some cases, he or she will have to take over courses previously taught by another instructor, a challenge in itself when students are used to having the curriculum taught in a particular way. More often, though, new professors are expected to fill a gap in the curriculum by creating courses in subject areas that may be unfamiliar to them.

For example, as a graduate with a Ph.D. in fifteenth-century liturgical music, I was at least astute enough to realize that my new teaching duties would not be confined to the music of the late middle ages. Nevertheless, I was not mentally prepared for the full extent of the teaching duties to which I was eventually assigned, including other eras of music history, theory, analysis, counterpoint, aural skills, violin instruction, and computer applications. The reality of the smaller schools is that they are forced through economic necessity to fill multiple needs. As a result, they hire professors who can do double or triple duty when required, and not merely stick to their subject area. Needless to say, the strongest candidates for such jobs are those who have developed subject knowledge in secondary areas, and have a combination of skills that fits the school's needs. For example, musicology graduates would be well advised to keep up their performance skills. Those whose expertise is in an era of western music might also find it valuable to pursue some study of non-western cultures, the better to position them for teaching ethnomusicology.

Another sometimes unexpected dose of reality comes in the form of library and technological resources. While all university libraries strive to keep up-to-date, not all have the same budgetary capacity or mandate. A student at a large, well-endowed research institution with a library that has been authorized to obtain practically every book and journal might begin to take its comprehensive resources for granted. But at smaller universities the music department competes for its one small piece of the library budgetary pie. In some cases, the library requires that specific requests come from the professor. In other words, it's often up to you to identify what is missing from the library, what you require for your teaching and research, and what your priorities are from year to year when the budget is very finite. All of this must be factored into your preparation time for teaching.

Other instructional resources should also not be overlooked. It is important to keep abreast of the technologies for course content and delivery. As the new hire, you may be expected to be acquainted with a variety of computer software and hardware, even if technology is not your specialty. Moreover, if such resources are lacking, it may fall to you to assist the department either by formulating new courses or by lobbying for the necessary funds and space to make your department competitive with others of similar size. The needs of the curriculum may also demand that you acquire or develop new computer skills. Ultimately, the technological resources which you may have taken for granted as a graduate student at a large institution are not necessarily available at smaller campuses. These factors must also figure prominently in your preparation time.

Life as a professor at a small school requires much investment of time in areas you may not have previously considered, at least not when your life as a graduate student was slanted heavily in favour of research. Professors must contribute service to the university in the form of committee work and administrative duties both within their department and without. This service must be demonstrated when it comes to tenure and promotion. On the other hand, untenured faculty are not usually expected to contribute as much as their senior colleagues to administrative work. Junior faculty time is better spent on developing new courses and on research to strengthen the eventual tenure application. Once again, though, reality steps in. University service duties may be light at first, but the day-to-day operations of a small department cannot be ignored and everyone must do their share.

The challenge, then, is to balance these duties with the responsibility of preparing new courses while trying to keep time aside for one's own research. Luckily, departments tend at least to be sympathetic to this dilemma, even if such sympathy does not always translate to course relief. In some cases, new hires are granted a small amount of relief in their first year to help ease the transition. It also seems to be common practice for full-time faculty to be given at least one day a week for research. But to be truly productive requires a great deal of discipline. Large research projects progress slowly under such conditions, and it is often only in the long-awaited summer months that a significant advance can be made, assuming there are no teaching duties and few administrative ones.

Once established in the teaching and research patterns of one's own department, one should not lose sight of the benefits of networking with other scholars at the university, particularly those in cognate disciplines. Taking part in cross-disciplinary symposia is a good way to become known in wider circles. (After all, tenure committees are comprised of more than just music scholars.) Such contacts may also lead to joint research to which your expertise may add a valuable dimension. This kind of group initiative is often looked upon favourably by granting agencies. New faculty orientation sessions and other welcoming events are also useful, not merely as a source of information but also as a means to meet other newcomers. These people will likely be your longest-lasting colleagues.

Academic conferences are not only useful venues for communicating your research, but are also an excellent means to keep current with the discipline in general, to see what new work is being done in your specific research field, and to learn about new ideas, strategies and technologies for teaching. Even more important for job seekers, however, are the opportunities to make contacts with scholars and administrators who may well be talent scouting. One can occasionally learn in this way about job openings before they are advertised, a decided advantage. In my own case, a successful job interview was the end result of a chance contact made at a conference where I was merely an attendee as a student member of the society.

I have a few additional thoughts for those who have successfully traversed the road to professor. First, remember you are the "new kid on the block" who, in many cases, is closest to the students in age and background. This can have both advantages and

disadvantages. It is often difficult, particularly in the first year or two of an appointment, to find the middle ground between the student confidante and the faculty peer, who must retain a respectful but professional distance from student life. You must find a way to demonstrate to students your understanding of their point of view, perhaps with related anecdotes from your own student experiences, while still showing your colleagues your serious commitment to the goals and policies of your department.

Second, start thinking about the tenure process right away! You need to know the combination of research, teaching and university service that will be expected by the tenure committee as well as how these assessment categories are judged by your own department. Of course, talking to other instructors, particularly those who may have recently gone through this process, is a good place to start. For general requirements, your faculty association should be consulted. You should also be wary of taking on additional commitments to your teaching and research load. As the new recruit, you may feel that you want to sow the seeds of good will by agreeing to more and more administrative tasks. While a certain amount of this practice is judicious, it is inadvisable to say "yes" to everything. You may garner more respect from your colleagues by turning down the odd request because this shows you are effectively prioritizing your time in the lead-up to tenure. Generally, the people who hired you want you to be successful in achieving tenure and thus will agree with your decision.

While traversing the distance from graduate student to professor, I was grateful

for the practical and emotional support of colleagues from my alma mater. In my opinion, it is vital to keep ties with these individuals throughout your early career. Your former course supervisors and the members of your dissertation committee, to whom you are now a colleague, are well suited to write reference letters about the significance of your research or the effectiveness of your teaching. Your faculty librarian, particularly at a large school, may be able to provide advice on obtaining research materials that are unexpectedly absent at your new institution. Your fellow students

may gain positions at other universities and become your professional colleagues down the road. What I am underscoring is that we are all members of a larger academic musical community. The move from graduate student to professor, from large school to small, should not be viewed as a leap into isolation, but rather as a move to a wider circle of professional life, one where the inner circles are still accessible, and where mentors and students alike become colleagues and fellow travellers.

