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Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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Helping Future Faculty “Come Out” As Teachers

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I study graduate education--specifically, the formation of future faculty and the professional development programs that help them learn to teach. Over the past seven years, I have interviewed more than 70 doctoral students and postdocs in science, engineering, and math at leading research universities. When I ask my respondents why they initially chose to pursue a doctorate, they usually tell me how much they enjoyed their undergraduate education, which was characterized by powerful learning experiences driven by strong relationships with smart and passionate instructors. My respondents fondly recall professors who stoked students' curiosity, demonstrated the thrill of scientific discovery, and regularly urged these students to see themselves as scholars as well. Inspired by role-modeling and encouragement, my respondents wanted a job teaching undergraduates and doing research—just like the faculty who inspired them. But to become a professor, they were told, you'll need a PhD. And off they went to the nation's most competitive graduate schools, perhaps not fully understanding what lay ahead but expecting nonetheless it would make them too into teacher-scholars who excelled at both research and teaching.

But what many of my study participants really learned during grad school about teaching was how little it is valued. While not surprised to hear that academic success depends on becoming a first-rate researcher, many interviewees were dismayed by messages that being a good researcher is incompatible with being a good teacher--either because there is not enough time for pedagogical training (and, after all, it can be easily learned on the job) or because an obvious interest in teaching is a sign of a failed researcher.

For some, developing a single-minded focus on research was not difficult. But for many I interviewed, becoming a college teacher is an expression of identity, perhaps even a calling (Palmer, 1992). To repress their abiding interest in teaching was in fact an act of self-abnegation that gave rise to frustration, anxiety, and disappointment. As a way of coping, many respondents led a kind of double life as doctoral students, playing up their genuine interest in research when among faculty and classmates, only to slip away later to attend programs with others curious about college teaching and student learning. When one respondent described her advisor's stance toward her interest in teaching as "the academy's version of 'don't ask, don't tell,'" it occurred to me that she and many others like her are spending their doctoral programs "in the closet" as teachers, which may negatively affect their formation of an authentic faculty identity.

The point of this essay is to explore why graduate students with faculty aspirations so often must be in the closet with respect to their interest in teaching. One way to consider the implications of having to hide one's identity is to draw upon research on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in a heterosexist society. This essay makes an analogy between the two types of marginalization to reframe the implications of advising doctoral students to deny their interest in teaching. I also offer ways to support future faculty wishing to "come out" as teachers.

What Being Closeted as an LGBT Person Can Mean

'Coming out' and 'being in the closet' terms are being used in non-LGBT contexts more than ever. In this broader sense, someone in the closet chooses not to disclose some personal characteristic or interest that may be viewed as being outside social norms and as a source of embarrassment or retribution. Based on my own and others' study of LGBT college students (e. g., Bilodeau & Renn; 2005; Connolly, 2000; Evans & Wall, 1991; Rhoads, 1994), being in the closet with respect to one's gender identity is frequently characterized by these experiences:

1. **risk management**—being ever vigilant against possible exposure leading to public shaming and possibly physical violence;
2. **invisibility and isolation**—feeling a pervasive sense of "otherness" among the dominant culture, sometimes compounded by a difficulty with finding others who are safe and affirming;

3. **evasion and deception**—either avoiding circumstances in which one must identify as a member of a marginalized group, or putting up a false front in hopes of “passing” as a member of the dominant culture;
4. **emotional exertion and depletion**—having to manage, often alone, strong emotional responses (e.g., guilt, self-doubt, anxiety, frustration, anger, fear, and loneliness).

Does This Relate to What Aspiring College Teachers Experience?

As shown by my interview data, doctoral students who self-identify as college teachers described circumstances during their doctoral training that sound similar to the experiences of closeted LGBT people.

- Study participants learned that admitting an interest in teaching exposes them to career-related risks seen and unseen, regardless of their research proficiency and productivity. As a result, doctoral students who identify as college teachers self-monitor more than those focused primarily on research.
- Some sometimes overemphasized their genuine interest in research to pass themselves off as the kind of laser-focused doctoral students that advisors tend to favor. While their interest in research was just as or almost as strong as their interest in teaching, they struggled to understand why teaching and research were presented so dualistically, and why there seemed only one right way to be a doctoral student.
- Study participants who broached their interest in teaching with their faculty advisor faced a range of reactions. Although a few advisors were enthusiastic, it was more common for advisors to react with some ambivalence, stipulating that teaching development activities were permissible as long as it did not affect the doctoral student’s research productivity. Sadly, several respondents described a type of advisor who considered an advisee’s interest in teaching to be a tacit repudiation of the advisor’s research agenda. Through any number of passive-aggressive tactics—chilly exclusion, gradual withdrawal of opportunities and rewards, even the silent treatment—the aggrieved advisor would gradually “disown” the hapless doctoral student.
- Several respondents who kept their true career intentions concealed during their doctoral program were nevertheless disowned once they outed themselves by taking a job at a teaching-focused institution. To

endure being labeled a “disappointment” to their advisor and having to leave one’s lab “family,” these respondents were sustained by support from near-peers and seasoned colleagues in institutions that support teaching. It took time to reconstruct an academic identity independent of their advisor, but the anguish was worth being true to themselves.

What might this mean for doctoral students?

From what we know about LGBT identity development and the harm that being in the closet can ultimately wreak, perhaps asking doctoral students to conceal an interest in teaching can no longer be seen as merely well-meaning career advice. Since this analogy, like any, has its limits, I only want to suggest that the often-implicit demand by departments and advisors that graduate students hide their interest in teaching may be exacting hidden costs, both personally and professionally, on our future faculty.

Suggestions for helping future faculty come out as teachers

1. Explicit support of faculty is key; if not one’s own advisor, then the support of other faculty is even more crucial. Consider a model of “distributed advising” that allows doctoral students to get advice from other faculty. Give doctoral students tools and tactics to assert themselves and manage conflict with their advisor.
2. Reduce doctoral student isolation; foster communities that take teaching seriously. Bring back college teachers who “survived” to tell their stories. Incorporate them into a multigenerational network within and beyond the institution.
3. Encourage teaching development programs that are designed for graduate students. As my research shows, high-quality teaching development not only provides pedagogical skills and knowledge, but also validates participants, builds community, and supports formation of varied academic identities. Provide offerings allowing different levels of effort and participation (e.g., podcasts, web sites, social media).
4. Challenge conventional wisdom about doctoral students who care deeply about teaching—e.g., that they are not good at

research, or won't get good jobs. Offer alternative messages to "research is all that matters" and "teaching is not hard."

5. Be upfront that taking teaching seriously is risky business; and that the degree of risk is in direct proportion to the research status of the doctoral program.

Even well meaning faculty often advise doctoral students to conceal their interest in teaching in order to be successful academics. But for those students who go to grad school to become teacher-scholars, such "advice" actually demands that they deny an important part of their identity.

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