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Narrative 3: Opie Hampton

Opie Hampton is an assistant professor at a Baccalaureate College. At the time of the interview, he had been in his position a little over one year. In this narrative he describes his unique graduate school experience that allowed him to do a lot of teaching and then pursue a position that focuses on teaching. Opie also describes his research, which he still does with enthusiasm even though it's not necessarily required for tenure at his institution.

How I got here

So, when I was in high school, there was a class – enrichment – it was one of those kind of, the special kids. And there were a couple teachers there, one in particular who I'm still in contact with – it was one of those [classes] which was very open ended, and you could take it several times and so one semester I did two independent studies at the same time within the one class. It was one of those sorts of things. And that [teacher] was kind of one of those people that inspired me that maybe teaching was something I could do.

And then on the other side of that, I had another class my senior year that was scientific research – something like that. It was run by the head of the science department who was a civil engineer by training. There were eleven, twelve of us maybe, that got into that class and did an engineering or science project. Between talking to [those two teachers], they really shaped my direction in engineering and science in general, and started that thought process towards teaching.

And then undergrad, I actually started as a physics major, for almost two and a half years. I got pretty far. [And then I took a class where] the whole class was just complex equations and everything, and I was like, no. I'm done with this. I'm going to engineering. But all along the way, both when I was in physics and engineering, I was a TA for a physics 1 class. So right from the very beginning, it was like, ok maybe teaching is what I want to do. I very quickly found out that I liked to explain things to people, I was good at it. My Dad still tells a story about me and my brother. He was at a large public institution taking a physics class, one of those 100+ weed out courses where the professor gets to know maybe 1% of the students and 90% of them are only there because they have to be. Spent the entire semester struggling with the content until

over Thanksgiving break he sat down with me back home and I gave him a crash course in Physics 1. Rocked the final and ended up boosting his grade by a letter grade.

I knew pretty much by the time I graduated from undergrad, I knew I wanted to teach. And I knew I wanted to teach higher ed. I wanted to go into college, university teaching. I wanted the extra freedom that comes with being able to teach at higher ed and not have to worry about the structure and all the overhead that comes with K-12. And I wanted to teach students that, at least for the most part, wanted to be there, and had an interest in what I was teaching. And so, when I was applying to grad school, I knew that even when I was applying. And that was something that, going into it, factored into my decision as to where I went. I knew that to get into academia at a high level, I needed to have my PhD from a well-respected institution and I needed opportunities to teach while in grad school.

And at the time, I didn't know that engineering education was a thing at all. I didn't figure that out until years later. But when I was looking at schools, I [was] looking for the big name, and at the same time, I was looking for an advisor who I think can accommodate the fact that I don't want to be the all-star researcher. That's not something that interests me, that's not something that ever interested me, and even then, I don't know what made me aware of it, but I knew that if I didn't find an advisor that recognized that, I was setting myself up for a bad time. And I have no idea where I picked that up, but I did, somewhere. Somebody told me.

I talked to [my advisor] about the fact that, hey this is what I want to do, this is my long-term goal, and he was remarkably accommodating. And his background – so [my advisor] was one of the research stars of the department. He was on a bunch of the marketing brochures, he was bringing in million dollar grants all the time, a huge researcher. So, it was interesting to me that he would be so accommodating to the fact that I don't want that.

It was probably my second year into grad school, he had me – I wasn't officially a TA, but he was teaching a dynamics class, and he had me, basically I wrote all the exams for him, and helped with some of the grading. I was a very informal pseudo-TA for that. And then he had me do a guest-lecture for his vibrations class. [He] encouraged me strongly to apply for a [teaching fellowship for graduate students]. I did, I got it, and ended up teaching statics as part of that fellowship. And that was awesome. Because that was the first time that I had a class that was mine and I was teaching it, and it was just awesome. And it was around that point in time that I

thought, hey this teaching thing is pretty cool and there's a department over here that does engineering ed, maybe I should think about switching.

I had a very long conversation with [a professor in engineering education] about what engineering ed was and was it something that I wanted to do, and we eventually decided no, because I was – because when I came in the door I needed an accelerated research program, because that's not what I wanted to do, because I was like, let's get in, get out, let's move on with life. So, I actually, I walked in the door and was handed a project ready to go, and I was on track to be done in like four years. So, we decided after talking about it that I'm set up with my dissertation in [my current department] – I was going to be done in four years.

And so, at that point I was two and a half years into it, and so switching after, basically I was almost done with my data collection, so I was like, that's probably not a good idea, let's stay in [my current department]. But, she put me in touch with [a woman], who, I have absolutely no idea why, but for some reason [she] decided that I would be a great person to teach a section of [introduction to engineering] and just brought me onboard. And I still don't totally understand what led her to decide that that would be a good connection, but she did, and I went for it. And that's how I ended up teaching [introduction to engineering]. My little foray, informally, into engineering ed, that's how that all got started.

So, I'm in grad school, venturing off into engineering ed. I've taught [an engineering course], I've taught [introduction to engineering] a couple of times. Oh, so my advisor left, he actually left the university, probably 2013, I want to say. So, a year before I graduated, I was orphaned. Yeah, which was fun, and then the lab packed up and left, which was also fun. I was literally orphaned with nowhere to go, and I think that was actually kind of a blessing in a lot of ways, because without my major advisor, I was really forced to pick up a lot of my dissertation work early and get it done before he was out of contact.

Because a lot of times you end up – once your dissertation work is kind of wrapping up and you're in that writing and getting things put together phase, you get random extra projects, right? I didn't have any of that because my advisor and lab were gone. And that bought me a lot of time to get to do whatever I wanted to do. So that was really what let me to get into the teaching [introduction to engineering] and everything else. And doing everything that I did over in engineering ed, because I didn't have anybody saying, hey, you need to get in the lab and run

this test for me for an unrelated project, or go talk to this potential project client or whatever. I was free to do whatever, and so that really opened up a lot of opportunities for me to kind of find my own way, and that was hugely impactful for my trajectory.

I started applying to schools – there was one semester that was a mess. I was putting together application materials, I was teaching two classes, and I was trying to finish my dissertation. That was a nightmare. That fall of 2014. That was awful. I would not wish that on anyone. But I got through it. And I found some cool places [to apply for permanent positions].

When I was going through the job application process, I really – I knew at that point that I wanted to teach specifically, and I knew from having talked to people, especially over in the engineering ed department, that I could find smaller schools that would give me the leeway to focus on the teaching. And my undergraduate institution was one of those sorts of places. It has a graduate program, but the whole school is only maybe 5,000. So, I knew that kind of environment, that's what I had come out of from undergrad, and I kind of wanted to get back to it. So that's where I focused a lot of my applications, were those smaller schools. More teaching focused institutions.

So, I went through all that process and ended up finding [Current Institution, a Baccalaureate College] just on a job site, I don't remember which one, Academic Keys, I don't know, found it, applied, came to visit, loved it.

[During] the visit, I had interviewed with the dean, I had interviewed with the provost and the associate provost, interviewed with all of the engineering faculty all at once, I was just put in a room for an hour and they told the faculty, show up and talk with this guy. So that was interesting. It was kind of a free-form discussion. It really provided an opportunity to observe the culture of the department, see how the faculty interacted with each other, and kind of envision whether or not I could see myself here. This was actually a really important factor for me. Every big decision I've made, grad school, undergrad, I base a big part of it on how the place feels. And [Current Institution] really just fit.

I had to do a presentation, and I was asked to do a research presentation, which was interesting, since the expectation of research at [Current Institution] and places like it is actually pretty small. But they asked me to talk about my research, but it was a presentation to students, I think they were juniors who I was presenting to. And the faculty all sat in. So, I had to explain,

basically my dissertation work, to a bunch of juniors in a way that was interesting and exciting for them, for half an hour. So that was fine, that was fun. At the end of the presentation all of the faculty left and it was just me and the students for a while, with them asking questions and kind of evaluating me. That was also pretty cool. It gave another chance to kind of evaluate the culture and see how I fit in.

I think it was a total of five weeks from first phone interview to, I had an offer and was bringing [my wife] out to make sure that accepting it was going to be ok for her. It was a really quick process once it got moving. And that's how I got to where I am.

My past experiences and preparations for teaching

[One way I learned to teach was through] observation, because I was working with my advisor really early on in grad school, teaching classes with him, and then I did the [teaching] fellowship, in which I was observing another faculty member in ME and teaching statics, and then also teaching [introduction to engineering] and – so it was observation which turned into experiential learning. And then the second source was taking [an engineering education] class, and in that class we did a lot of, how do you prep a teaching statement, for example. The very first draft of my teaching statement came out of that class as one of our deliverables. So that was another big contributor.

And then the third one was I did some of the workshops and courses that [the teaching center at Master's and PhD University] offered, and I didn't actually do the paperwork for the graduate teaching certificate, but I did most of the requirements. So that was another big source of input.

[While at Master's and PhD University], I taught [introduction to engineering] both semesters [of my last year], and then they kept me on after I graduated. I actually finished in December 2014, and they kept me on in Spring as a lecturer, and I taught two sections of [introduction to engineering] that semester while I was applying [for jobs]. Because I finished at kind of a weird – graduating in December is kind of odd for the hiring cycle. So that's what I did.

I don't know that I would change [my graduate school experience] that much [if I had the chance], and the reason why is, I think for me, it was really important to get that teaching experience and all of the opportunities that came with that, but that's not for everybody. So, I

don't know that I would ever say, everyone is required to teach. Because if you don't want to go into teaching, I don't want you teaching a lab, because you're not going to like it, you're not going to want to do it, you're not going to do well.

I guess if I could change something, maybe it would be to kind of split it up, and have – it's the same degree, but do you have a research focus or a teaching focus. And let the research focused people go do research and let the teaching focused people kind of bring out more of those opportunities. I had a lot of great opportunities, but it's because, in a lot of cases, I lucked into them, or I went out and found them, and it wasn't really baked into any program in a meaningful way. It's just that I cobbled it together. I guess if I could change something it would be to create a defined teaching track, and scaffold in some of those opportunities that I had but make it available to everybody that wants to take advantage of them.

My early days as a professor and what I am doing now

We teach five courses a year. Whether you do that three in the spring, two in the fall, whatever. And that's a little variable, like some people have a little more than that because they'll teach labs, like the thermal sciences folks for example, they've got a bunch of labs with their classes, so their contact hours are a little bit more involved. Versus some people like me, on paper, my load actually looks a lot less than some of the other faculty. Because I teach – none of my classes have labs, so I teach both of our first-year engineering classes, I teach statics, dynamics, and I teach a sophomore computers course. And so, none of those have labs, they're just straight lecture or studio. So, my contact hours on paper are a little bit lower.

The flip side to that is, being someone who can't sit still, I showed up and threw out the entire first-year curriculum and we started over. So, a lot of my time goes into teaching because last year was developing the entire curriculum as we went and then this year it's going back and polishing and readjusting things. So, I have a lot of non-contact teaching duties right now, that have filled a lot of time.

And then I'm also – I teach our freshman orientation class for the department, and that doesn't count for teaching load because it's a zero-credit class. So that's fun. And as part of that, I advise half – so everyone advises basically half of a cohort, because that's the numbers that we have. So, I have thirtyish advisees every year, they take some time too.

We have a requirement of five [office] hours, set by the university, in a week, you are supposed to have five. I have six because it was easier to just make it consistent. But then at the same time, [Current Institution] has a very open-door policy, so most everybody's door is pretty much always open and if it's not open, [the students will] knock. So, they kind of expect to be able to come ask questions whenever. That's just the culture.

What tenure looks like here

Teaching, scholarship, and service, are the three. And service, they include both service to the campus and service to the community. So, you not only have service in the sense that I'm on committees, or search committees or whatever, but you're also expected to interact with and integrate with the surrounding community.

Teaching is the bulk of it for sure, I don't know if I could put a rough percentage on it because it changes year to year, but teaching is far and away the most important. All your course evaluations, your department chair reads them and then the dean reads them, and you're supposed to, for every class put together a reflection on your course evaluations. Just a little one pager on what students said in their comments and what your Likert scores were and then what do you think about that. How do you react to it, are you going to change something, do you disagree, do you feel the need to explain something?

So, every course, every semester that we write one of those, the department chair reads it and writes a paragraph response after reading your course evals and then it goes to the dean, and the dean reads all of that and writes a response. And then that whole form goes into your tenure packet. So yeah, teaching is – there's a big, very directed, reflective process that goes along with that.

We also do, with the teaching, FCARs, faculty course assessment reports, is what I think it stands for. We look at the student data and all of our course outcomes, and say these outcomes, we had how many As, how many Bs, how many Cs on each outcome, and then we talk about what changes we made, did it work, what changes we are going to make going forward. And those are filed – they don't go into our tenure binders, but the first couple department meetings of every semester are talking through the FCARs form the prior semester. So even the teaching –

you say, hey, I tried this, it didn't work, does anyone have any ideas, and there's a discussion among the department, hey I did this in my class, you might try it. So that's interesting.

Back to tenure, the scholarship piece is – they define that as scholarly activity. So that's not just you did research and got the big journal publication. It's, as long as it's peer-reviewed, conferences and journals are great. You are expected to do some of that, but there's no hard number. Grants are a piece of it, you're not expected to bring in any dollars, but if you do, that's a big plus, and applying for grants, even if you don't get them, you get credit, and attending conferences and workshops, and just saying current in your field.

And, doing consulting work, if you do any consulting work with industry or anybody, all of that counts as scholarship. So, it's really less scholarship in a researcher-y sense as it is scholarship that is stay current in your field and do something. Whatever that may be. So that's important, but it's not – you go to [a doctoral university with very high research activity], and they say you must publish six journals in these particular journals and you must bring in your salary times three in grant dollars or whatever – there's none of that.

Every year, we meet with the dean and the college tenure and promotion committee and talk about what we've done over the last year and what their expectations are as far as what else we might need to do going forward, to really set us up that after we hit the actual – when we are actually applying for tenure, it's basically automatic, is their goal.

So, I am probably overly active [in terms of scholarly activity]. I am now in my third semester and I have – so in the technical scholarship, I'm not doing a whole lot, I'm probably going to try to get something going over the next year or two, I just got a bunch of equipment with some start-up money, but mostly I'm just digesting my PhD research. Like, I just got a journal article accepted last week, that came out of my doctoral work.

But most of my new activity is in the pedagogical side of things. So, I just got a grant at the end of last semester, joint with a couple other people, we got like ten grand to develop a non-destructive testing elective, and so the two other people, their research field is in non-destructive testing, and they brought me onboard to basically help them design the course piece. And so, I've got that going, so that's a big plus. And then I've got some internal grants, I'm helping coordinate this effort to develop some online courses for our mechanics sequence: statics, dynamics, strengths of materials, so there's four or five faculty developing those courses. I'm

helping with basically all of them. I think I'm kind of – I'm not the norm. Between revising first-year and all the other projects, I've had just a ridiculous amount of scholarly activity over my first year, that I don't think anyone expected. That's mostly pedagogy. Like I had a paper at ASEE this summer, and had another paper at a first-year conference. That's where most of my activity is.

I think I probably need to pick up the service piece and that's probably going to require a step back somewhere else. I think I'm also – I think the balance, I mean you have some much time in your life, and right now, I think my first year, I dumped a little bit more time than I should have into work. So especially now with [my baby], I think I need to pull back a little bit. But within the box that is work, I think it's decently balanced.

Other thoughts

A week after [my interview], they called and said they had an offer for me, and then the following weekend I went out with [my wife] to look around and see if it would be ok with her and look at [a neighboring town] and see if we could find a house there. And they were so accommodating it was amazing. The dean met us for breakfast, they put us up in a hotel, there's a hotel attached to campus, they paid for it. They organized a group of – there's a women's group at [Current Institution] – they got some people from that group to come and sit down and talk with [us] about life in the area. It was a tremendous effort on their part to welcome [my wife], not just me, because I guess they wanted to hire me and recognized that she was an important part of that equation, so they really rolled out the red carpet for her for that second visit. Which is something I don't know you'd see at a lot of places. So that was very cool. That was very indicative of the culture at [Current Institution]. It's a very welcoming – family is important; life-balance is important - kind of a place.