

Buswell, N. T. (2017). Narrative 6: Jason Talbert. In *Swimming upstream: Pathways of new engineering faculty at non-R1 institutions* (Doctoral dissertation). Pages 154 – 163.

Narrative 6: Jason Talbert

Jason Talbert is an assistant professor at a Master's Institution; however, the college of engineering at this institution grants only bachelor's degrees. At the time of the interview, Jason had been in his position for one year. In this narrative, Jason describes how he overcame the bias that made him feel like he needed to want a job at a research university. He also describes the moment he realized that there were institutions that focus on undergraduate teaching, and how his current institution is a perfect fit for him.

How I got here

I did not know what I wanted to do, really. I was attracted to engineering because I had this curiosity for how things actually work. I was like – computers, how do they actually run? That's what attracted me to engineering. I did a co-op [during my undergrad], I worked in a cubicle and hated it, and so I had this, not quite an existential crisis, but I was like, oh my gosh, what am I going to do? I don't want to work in a cube my whole life.

Around that time, a professor approached me and asked if I wanted to be a teaching assistant for a lab based course. And I said, ok, and he said, we'll pay for your master's, and I said, great! I get to stay in school [at Undergraduate and Master's University, a Doctoral University: Highest Research Activity] and not graduate. So later, the year before I actually finished my master's, the chair approached me and said, hey would you like to teach a course over the summer semester, we have a need, and I was like, ok, great! So, I taught introduction [to engineering course] and just fell in love with teaching at that point, and said, alright, this is what I want to do. Had a blast.

I talked to the professor, and he said, well you need a PhD, which is a research degree, and you have no research. So, I said, alright, I guess I'll do something. So, I jumped on a project and applied to grad school. Really, I only applied to two grad schools, and [PhD University, a Doctoral University: Highest Research Activity] offered me more money, so that's where I went. That's when I realized I want to pursue the PhD path, finding the joy in teaching.

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At [PhD University], there really weren't many opportunities to teach, and I was just like, well this is the necessary evil of doing research, but I absolutely fell in love with the research when I was there and had a lot of fun, so I don't know.

My advisor was big on pushing me to – he was an alum at [Doctoral University: Highest Research Activity], he was at [PhD University], but he was big in pushing me to work in the [tech industry] type path and getting a non-academic type job. And at one point, I was interviewing [at a tech company], and just, and I don't know, I was there, stuck in traffic, they're making these ridiculous sums of money, and I was just breaking down – I don't want to do this. This is not at all what I want. That was I think, that was the fall before I defended. So, then I came back, and said, ok, I'm going to go the academic route. I had one round of academic interviews that just flopped. I had a research scientist appointment at [PhD University], a glorified post-doc, so I didn't have all my chickens in one basket, or chips in the game, or whatever.

The next round came about and I threw it all in, and I got a bunch of interviews, and happily found out that a place like [Current Institution, a Master's Institution] existed. So, I didn't realize that there were teaching universities that had undergraduate engineering, that was not pure research focused, and I was like, this is great. [During my interview at Current Institution, I noticed] the faculty here were so phenomenally happy. They just get along with each other, they're just happy people, they look like they're enjoying their lives.

The other thing was that the department chair who I interviewed with knew just about every student's name in the hallway and would stop and ask questions and just chat about stuff. And he just knew things that were going on in their life. And I was just like, this is amazing. I've never seen any other environment like that, and that really stuck out in my mind as I was comparing everything. It made it feel like the department is a team, but there is a sense here that the students are part of that team, they're not the antagonist, they are – we're all in this together, and that just totally – I got that feeling on the interview, seeing our department chair just know so many people.

[But before that], coming from [PhD University], as being a big R1, and I had a good friend from [another R1], he was maybe one or two years ahead of me, I know him from conferences. He ended up getting a job at [a master's institution]. And I was like, woah, this is a

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big change for you. And I talked to him a lot, called him up on the phone several times to talk to him about that, and we were both talking that, there's this really scary thing that once you leave the R1-realm, there's a huge bias there. There's this – you feel like you fail, the sense that you're a failure, that people are going to look down on you, and all sorts of other stuff. And that was the scariest part.

I interviewed and got a job offer from an R1 school. And that was kind of like, alright, this is great. Because coming from [PhD University], that's the goal. To get a job teaching and doing research, even though I really didn't want to do the research and get grants, I just wanted to teach, but I was like, whatever, you have to do this. I was almost not ready to accept the job [Current Institution], just because I was like, well, if I do that, I'll be stuck in this tier of institution and all this other stuff.

I think it was probably my wife was like, “[Jason], this is your dream, this is what you want.” And I was like, you're totally right. I had my big pro-con list, describing [Current Institution, and I finally reminded myself], this is my dream job that I wanted to take. Why am I internally struggling and fighting myself against what I actually want versus this other job that I would end up hating? Just because of the bias that you should go to an R1. That was just really hard to overcome.

[Back to my advisor] – when I finally told him I was going the faculty route, he was happy to help me. He read over statements and gave some advice there. He was pushing – he told me, he basically told me, you should go to [an R1], he talked about the back channel of communication, the chair of the search committee I think, contacted him, and he – and was pushing me. When I finally called him the last time and told him, I got these – I forget how many offers I got, three or four offers on the table, and he was like, he finally said, “[Jason], that's great. At this point, it's all preference, you should go wherever you want.” At the very end, he finally kind of relinquished that. And I really told him I was thinking about this, and I know I didn't need that from him, I was going to take the job anyway, but that was kind of relaxing, when he finally said, “you know, at this point, when you have job offers and stuff, get what you want, go where you think you'll fit in best.” That was – it was just hard to overcome that bias coming from him.

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My friend who ended up at [a master's institution as well], because I knew he had gone down this path, and it was really just reassuring to talk to him and hear that there are other people who make this crazy jump –leaving your R1 bubble to go to these small schools, even though that's – It's just ridiculous looking back how I thought I was failing, leaving that, but you're not at all.

My preparations for teaching

[My first teaching experience was in undergrad as a teaching assistant for a course], and I did that for several semesters. I really enjoyed it. I think I learned a lot, because I was pretty much in charge of the lab and I just did a lot of – I guess now, I see, teaching by walking around, is our term we call it, but I was going through with all the students and actually talking with them and asking them questions, to help them understand, and loved it.

[Then at PhD University], we were graduating PhD students without any experience teaching, so they had a mandatory TA assignment you had to do in the graduate school, for two units, two courses basically. Which on paper sounded awesome, but in practice, all a TA did was grade papers, they were a grader and that was it. It was horrible.

There was no push to actually have you teach or anything like that, and I think that was a big missed opportunity. I was a grader and I gave a few guest lectures, just one offs every now and then about the subject. Nothing much more than standing up and going – pretty much giving a research talk, it just happened to be in front of students. There weren't really any other opportunities. In hindsight I probably could have sought out more opportunities and been a lot more vigilant with that for myself. I don't know, I just didn't because – I was so busy with research and other things, and it wasn't readily apparent where I needed to go and who I needed to talk to, to seek those out.

I think they are trying – there are a couple of programs out there: preparing the professoriate, preparing future faculty, those types of things – that was getting started on my way out. I was ineligible for some reason, because I didn't finish one of my exams on the proper timeline. I really don't know [how I learned what faculty do]. I talked to my advisor a lot about just what he does, but his life looks so different than from what mine looks like now. He would fly all over the place talking to funding agencies and doing talks, that sort of thing. One thing

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that somewhat helped, I read a book, *The Academic Job Handbook*. That actually helped to get a good idea for what faculty do. All their advice about the actual job search was not that useful, but just in terms of how you balance teaching and all that, *that* was helpful. Really, it was probably my first interview that I totally flopped, but that actually gave me a really good sense, like, oh, this is kind of what professors do and how they think. It feels like something that just kind of pieced together through about seven years, and at the end I finally realized it.

[During my interview at Current Institution], I did have to give a teaching talk, so I did not have to give a research talk, it was just a teaching presentation. They gave me a topic to talk about and then I prepared how I would teach a 50-minute class on that topic. And that is so intimidating to do, because you have no idea what teaching technology you'll have, you have no idea what the room looks like, you don't know the students. That was massively intimidating much more than any other research talk, just because of the unknowns.

I will say that I felt the PhD process is a little bit a bait and switch, just like – it just feels like there are so many PhD students and then so few jobs and it's just terrifying to get there and realize, oh, most professors, well what it seemed like, most professors spend all their time writing grants and just doing research, and there are very few of these big jobs. I don't know, it just felt odd to finally get this realization – and this is biased to the R1s – but professors spend the majority of their time writing grants, managing students instead of teaching and doing research is what you think as an undergrad.

The professor I worked with when I was getting my master's and I TAed for, he cared about the students in his class almost to a fault, I felt like. He wanted them to do well, he would always know what was going on. Like, oh, so-and-so is involved with this extracurricular thing, or so-and-so's sick, he would know crazy stuff, and I think he really cared about his students. And I will say his students would always avoid his office when his door was open because he would stop them in the hallways and say come in here, let's talk. But, that really influenced me. He would really think about the students in his classes and think about what is best for them, and didn't want to over burden them, and just worried himself sick about every assignment he made, and he just wanted to be an effective teacher. I think that really stuck with me, because he asked me a lot about students, and what I thought about how the class was going and if concepts were

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landing, so I think a lot of what I have been doing kind of comes from that initial shaping. Hearing the struggle of trying to be a good teacher.

That would probably be the biggest influence I had, and kind of developed in a lot of that. Other than that, I think it may have been from my experiences as a student, just seeing what works and that sort of thing. Just dreaming about: what kind of teacher do I want to be?

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

It definitely is hard because – at [PhD University], I was told by my advisor that teaching is something we have to do, he openly hated his teaching job. So, it was hilarious coming here, where everyone is like, yes, teaching, I love interacting with undergrads! That wasn't something necessarily to overcome, it's just almost shocking how different attitudes are of faculty who are advising PhD students versus faculty who are predominantly teaching undergrads.

I did not come from an engineering education background, so where I learned, lecture was a lecture and then you had homework. So, a very traditional learning style, which matched me, which I am now realizing that there's selection bias for PhD candidates. I've had discussion with some faculty here about learning styles and just that not everyone learns like I do, and I'm trying to wrestle with that. So, I'm actively exploring other teaching methods. And one of my goals was to do some active learning. And I had no idea what active learning was – I thought that meant have a group discussion, and I thought, that's dumb for a math equation. But I'm now trying to integrate other methods and other styles, and I found out that this one [method based on the “flipped classroom”] just worked really well. I think that's how this course was taught previously, and I had some material that was teaching in that style. I'd never done it before, so I said, alright, I'm going to give it a few weeks and see how it goes, and might switch to something that better suits me.

But I found that I loved it. I could walk around and talk to students more and actually felt like I was covering material in more depth than I could have with a traditional lecture for this class. So, I don't know how it's going to work for other classes, but it had me start thinking about doing more in class exercise type, walk around assignments in my other more theoretical classes even.

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[At Current Institution, we] are required to keep six office hours per week. I don't include those office hours [in my syllabus], partially because those will change and I don't want to update those every year. So, I post office hours on my door, and I just tell students, come by and see those and you can figure out when office hours are. And I also tell them most of the time I'm in my office and if the door's open, come see me. So, I do keep a fairly open-door policy, and I try to be as available as possible. So, I don't include that in my syllabus, that usually gets mentioned the first class. Basically, where to find out where my office hours are and if you need me, just come by and I'll try to help you.

What tenure looks like here

There are scholarly requirements for tenure here, like there would be anywhere. I'm encouraged to publish and all of that, but it's more that I want to publish and stay active. It's a little bit of the requirements, but I think it's just that I personally want to succeed, and I think it's self-driving in a lot of ways. Definitely too thought, I mean, I guess if there were no requirements for tenure, I wouldn't do any research, and that would not be good for me as a professor in terms of just that my teaching would suffer because of that. I think a lot of the pressure though is coming from me personally.

It's been, just in terms of transition, it's been a little bit hard, I'm still trying to wrap my mind around where I should be in terms of scholarship, because there's technical scholarship and then there's pedagogical scholarship. I am trying to dabble into pedagogical research, but it's a whole new language. I think I saw Likert scale, and was like, what is this? And someone's like, oh that's like the agree-neutral-disagree scale, and I was like, oh, well ok. But it's just like, stuff like that, I have no idea what open questions are, I have all these students that I would love to take assessment based, but I'm trying to wrap my head around doing that, and trying to transition to some more pedagogy in terms of research, while also trying to figure out where I lie in terms of technical research and what I can do with undergrads.

So, scholarship is kind of the hardest transition, and going from – the other crazy thing – is going from where I had, I completely made up my own schedule, had as many hours I wanted a week just for research, to now teaching three courses, and that takes up every single hour of

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your time. During the semester it's hard – time management, I guess is kind of the other – teaching takes so much, but I also want to do something scholarly. It's hard to balance that.

Teaching is 70% of our – you have the pie-chart – teaching takes up 70%, that's what we are evaluated on every year. That includes peer evaluations from tenured faculty, student evaluations are factored in there which is always awesome. You know – if anyone at [Current Institution] is not a good teacher, they will not get tenure, that's kind of right off the bat. And then there are plenty of options for us to get help. But teaching is the main thing.

Scholarly activities are then; I think are 15%. And then there are other things like campus citizenship, basically service is the remaining part. So scholarly activities, it's expected but in terms of evaluation and that sort of thing, its counted very little both in our annual reviews. I think, just talking to the chair, everyone expects you to get one or two journal articles by the time you're up for tenure, and then a few other conference papers. So, research is expected to keep up, but also, they said, teaching is the main thing we are here to do; if we are not good teachers, we will not get tenure.

That being said, I also – it's much less pressure here than anywhere else that I interviewed, which is awesome. It goes back to all the faculty being happy when I interviewed. But I think, they've said, maybe one person in twenty years has gone up for tenure and not received it, so that takes a lot of the pressure off, which is also something I was looking for in that faculty search.

I am totally happy with [my balance of expectations], because, I mean, I think anywhere I would go, I think I would spend a lot of effort teaching, because I want to be effective. That's a personal goal of mine as a professor, as an academic. I want to be an effective teacher, so it's nice here that I am rewarded for the amount of effort I put in getting classes together and coming up with active activities and stuff like that. So, it's rewarding knowing that if I put in a lot of effort, then that will be reflected in my annual survey. In terms of balance, I am totally happy with it. I get to spend a lot of time with my family, I feel well rewarded, and I am respected for enjoying to teach. That's good.

Our annual review process is that you would talk with the department chair and dean of the college. I think the options for help would just be having more detailed mentoring and meetings and just saying, try this in you class, let's figure out some methods that work, and that

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sort of thing. I think that would be the options. And then, our college dean will also pay for trips to things like NETI [National Effective Teaching Institute]. So, there are other options like that to get training. But I think the biggest thing is just have the teachers mentor a little more intentional about that, versus just kind of open door policy mentoring. In terms of formal teaching support, the biggest things are peer-reviews. The tenured faculty are required to visit our classes and write up a report and meet with me about that. So that has to happen every semester.

Other thoughts

[During my PhD], there was just kind of a disregard for teaching based institutions. I remember I went to one seminar about job searching, and they would talk about how you need to have your research ready, and you should have parts of your dissertation ready to discuss, and I think another guy raised his hand and said, why is there no one representing any teaching positions or anything like that? There's a whole list of institutions that have been swept under the rug, and I wish that wasn't the case.

I wish it was mentioned more, that there are institutions for teaching in your job search, and actually give students opportunities in teaching. I think one of the good things that they could do would be to let students co-design courses with teachers. I know other schools have done that and I wish [PhD University] had a chance to do that. They have stuff to work on grants together, but that's great for a research focused job, but there are no opportunities for that in teaching. The one thing I would like to change could be something about co-teaching or something about opportunities to get in the classroom.

I have three young kids and with a family at home, just trying to balance that [has been hard], but I will say that everyone in this department has been very supportive of that, saying, if you need to spend time with your family, or if something comes up, just tell us and we can cover a class or we'll help work it out. So that's just really nice to know that there's that safety net, with the faculty here.