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Narrative 9: Richard Vine

Richard Vine in an assistant professor at a Doctoral University: Moderate Research Activity. At the time of the interview, he had been in his position for a little over three years. In this narrative, Richard describes his balance as a faculty member, including that he enjoys both his institution's shifting focus to research, as well as the more relaxed atmosphere and comparatively lower expectations for tenure.

How I got here

My dad was a high school math teacher for 36 years in [hometown]. I had him twice during high school, and it was just always really emphasized that education was important. Both my parents were educators. My mom had taken some time off to raise us kids, but it was always just kind of – it's important and you're going to college, somewhere, for something. Period. When I was a kid, my dad sold pencils to his students for a dime apiece for my college fund when I was growing up. Kids would forget to bring supplies to class, and he had this little side gig where he was selling them, and even as a kid growing up, we'd see his one of his former students at the store or something, and they'd be like, "oh [Richard], how is the college fund going? Boy, I must have contributed like fifty bucks to that college fund."

It was just always a thing that I was going to go. So, I [went to Undergraduate Institution, a Doctoral University: Highest Research Activity], and probably I was one of the only people that I know, that didn't change my major the whole time. That was it, I just liked it. And during that time, I was doing pretty well at it, and really wanted to, at that time, be a faculty. Or kind of knew that I wanted to do research, and I also liked teaching and interacting with people.

I had been, at that point, a lifeguard and swimming instructor during the summer for five or six years. I liked teaching, and I also really liked the really nitty-gritty research-y, engineering type stuff. I was like, ah, it would be really cool to be a professor. So as an undergrad, you have no clue what that really actually means. It's just kind of a thing. Like, hey, people have these jobs, without any clue about how to possibly get one.

Even when I was [at Undergraduate Institution], I didn't do any research, I didn't really interact with any of the research groups. I mean, I talked to a few faculty about doing it, but I

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was too busy with music, and it just never really materialized. But I knew that I wanted to go to grad school, and I had met my now wife, and she was wanting to go to grad school. And luckily, mostly based on her motivation and fortitude honestly, we both got into [Master's University, a Doctoral University: Highest Research Activity], and that was kind of the next step. I was still going into [Master's University] thinking, yeah, it would be really cool, and [Master's University] is a great school, and maybe I'd have a good shot getting into a faculty job, if I got my PhD there.

And it's funny. I look back, I got to [Master's University] and my whole perspective changed. There's a group of about five professors that are seriously crazy world-famous, like Academy of Engineering, fellows of every society. So, I worked for one of those guys, and the way that we had it, it was just all those research groups in one giant room. This was like, everybody is just in this one giant room, all these people who are graduate students and postdocs and research scientists and there's like 50 of us. And I was the only American student in that group.

It was like the United Nations in there. I don't want to say culture shock because it wasn't really a culture shock, but it was totally different. I mean, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, there was one Canadian guy, so close enough, one kid from Japan, a few people from a couple different countries in Europe, one from Austria, one from Switzerland, and Korea, obviously. I can't even name them all, you know what I'm saying. And some from countries that don't necessarily get along, like India and Pakistan, but everybody got along. It was really great.

Also, there were some of the absolute smartest people in the world, and so I felt like an idiot, basically. I don't want to say I was "top dog" at [Undergraduate Institution], but maybe close. I probably had the best GPA and what not and went off to [Master's University], and then I was just like, wow. People that were in that group, I'm still friends with a lot of them, there's one that's a faculty at [Elite Doctoral University: Highest Research Activity] now who just won the presidential early career award. There's some that are big managers at [Big Tech companies] and faculty at various other universities. They just kind of went off everywhere and became important people. It was kind of a rude awakening, but it was a lot of fun, and I got my master's degree and I think I did well, and still keep in touch with a lot of those folks.

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My wife and I both went to [Undergraduate Institution] for our undergrad and then we both went to [Master's University] for our Master's. We were getting our master's at the same time and she got a job offer at [Food Company] down in [another State]. And although being at [Master's University] was an awesome experience, because it's one of the best universities, right? We just couldn't see how we could possibly stay apart like that while I take three more years and finish my PhD at [Master's University].

I kind of always wanted to get my PhD. And I initially went to [Master's University], basically saying, yeah, I want to get my PhD. But then, her landing her dream job offer at [Food Company] was one of the factors, and the other factor was that I was doing computational and theoretical work. Just a lot of computer simulations [and] I just kind of was getting to be sort of over sitting at a computer all day. And it was really interesting, the physics of it, and the group members, everything. It was awesome. That was another factor though, because I was thinking I want to get my hands on some things, and actually build something and test it, and all that.

At that point I wasn't necessarily thinking I was going to be faculty even though I still wanted to be. By then I had realized how hard it is, right? How basically everybody wants to be faculty! You apply to a position and you're competing with like 200 other people. But then, basically my wife got the job offer and I just felt like maybe it was a good time to kind of move. [PhD University, an R1 Institution], when I first went there, I started in 2007, they just built this huge engineering and science research lab. A big four-story thing, brand new clean room facility and all this other fancy stuff, so they were really starting to make this giant push. They had gotten like 300 million dollars from [Tech Company] and the state to make this big giant push to become tier one. They are now, but at the time, it was kind of like, well, there's a lot of cool stuff here and it's improving and they're hiring, it's a good time to go there and I got to go through grad school with my wife working a good job and making a lot of money, so I didn't have to be the super poor grad student.

It was exciting and fun, and going there, I decided again, hey I do want to be faculty. I'm going to try and go for it. I am going to publish, participate in these conferences, really try to build a network and all this other stuff. So yeah, maybe I spent a little bit longer doing my PhD than maybe some people, but whatever. It was a good time. And unlike most people, I would say,

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who at some point [say] “God, I want to quit,” I never had that moment. Not really bad, anyway. I really liked everything, and I got to do some teaching.

When I joined the group [at PhD University], the postdoc in the group was [Sam], and he is one of my best friends now. As a postdoc, [Sam] was pretty much looking for faculty positions during that time, while I was starting ramping up my PhD. It turned out that we became really good friends and, so I knew everything that he was going through in terms of searching for faculty positions and finally getting some offers.

Now he’s a faculty at [PhD University]. But it was really awesome and eye-opening to have that experience and to be able to witness first-hand what actually happens. And then have him help me when the time came, I started sending out applications about when I was getting ready to graduate. Have him help me put together my application package and all that stuff. My PhD advisor was also very helpful and supportive. That first year, it was a good year for faculty applications because I think I sent out 50 applications, which is a crazy number. I hadn’t graduated yet, I graduated in December 2011, so I was graduating during the cycle, so I was semi-finalist, or whatever you want to call it, at a couple places. I applied anywhere and everywhere. The only places I did not apply would be positions where they were ultra-specific about what they were looking for. But if there was any even remote area of overlap, I applied. I think I probably even in some cases applied to some institutions that weren’t PhD granting. Maybe a couple here or there, but other than that, it was everything from your [Current Institution] to your [generic state school]. But no interviews or phone interviews or anything that time.

What ended up happening was that I stayed at [PhD University] for a postdoc, the reason primarily being that my advisor had moved to [another Doctoral University: Highest Research Activity] and basically still had money at [PhD University] that he couldn’t move with him. So, there was money available to pay me and I stayed to do more research and run the group, which is a pretty great experience. More or less run – watch over the remaining grad students to try and make sure they’re doing the right things, since [my advisor’s] in [another city].

And so, it was that next year, I sent out a few more applications and got interviews at [two institutions, one at R2, and one at Current Institution, a Doctoral University: Moderate Research Activity]. I got phone interviews. I was also a semi-finalist at a couple places, but the

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funny thing is – the phone interviews, I guess I excelled at those. In terms of – I got actual on-site interviews after both phone interviews. So, everybody who gave me a phone interview, I guess seemed to like me. It was awesome, you know. I got to go visit [an R2 Institution] and see what they're doing out there. And come out to [Current Institution], which I was mostly already familiar with from having grown up not that far away. My parents only live a four-and-a-half-hour drive [away]. So, they were thrilled when I got this job offer.

I had two offers. For my career at that point, [the other school] would have been a better move. I mean, the start-up package was better, they had just built a new clean room. A smaller clean room, but a brand new one. It's a minority serving institution. But the problem was it's in [US city where R2 Institution is located], frankly. My wife is a food-process engineer, and they paid for her to come over for [a visit] as well. But she just [said] there's not going to be a job there for [her]. Not in food. They have a nut processing plant or something like that, and the campus is nice, but we couldn't see our family living there.

In contrast, [Current City] is like back home for me, effectively. Like I said, I love the [area it's in] and even though there's still growth happening here, I mean [the other institution where I got an offer], as part of a [state university system], they were kind of undergoing something on a smaller scale than [PhD University], but huge growth and research expansion. But [Current Institution] has been doing that as well. It's, again, smaller scale than [PhD University], but growth is important. So, I saw growth and opportunities in both places.

I thought [the interview] was a good experience. I felt very welcome and at home, probably in part because I was really excited to come here and have the chance to be a faculty member. Basically, it consisted of a 45-minute research seminar, then personal interviews with most of the faculty, some tours of campus and labs, then the final meeting was with the dean. All-in-all, it was about two full days. It was basically exactly the same as the other place I interviewed as well. I didn't have to, and we typically don't make people do a teaching demonstration. I would say that in my own opinion, you can generally tell whether someone will be an effective teacher by the presentation and personal skills, both of which come out over the course of an interview.

I saw a lot of good positive things going on at [Current Institution]. I mean, the opportunity to move basically back home, and just a better probably fit for our family and for my

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wife to find a job. She had a job offer before I did. It was a fairly easy transition in terms of – the other thing that was hard was that she was pregnant with our second kid at the time. So, we were like, ok we are going to have to make sure this transition works out in terms of healthcare and making sure that everything is taken care of on that end. So that's sort of the path that led me here.

That second year of faculty applications, at that point, I was basically thinking, well, if I don't get any this year, I'll go work at [Tech Company] or something, or wherever. I guess, some people just don't get that lucky, but I guess I got that lucky. Of all the people I know personally that have gotten positions, most people don't get a whole slew of options. I was lucky to get two, frankly. I mean, a lot of times you're lucky to just get one. I've been happy with it.

My preparations for teaching

My parents were educators and I've always liked teaching. I just always loved teaching. I taught trumpet lessons and I taught swimming lessons and that was just always a fun thing for me. At [PhD University], I didn't do a lot of teaching. I never even got to be an instructor for a class. I was a TA for a class and I gave quite a few guest lectures or substitute lectures for my advisor and some other people's classes. When they had to travel, if they had to travel, then they'd be like, hey, can you give this lecture on topic X, you know? So yeah, it was kind of known that I was seeking that out and trying to gain some experience standing up in front of a classroom and being able to say that I taught part of this class. That's usually what it was.

It's funny – I go through all these faculty applicants now, and I basically judge their teaching and their research and sort of the other intangible aspects of their applications, and I look at the teaching and I'm like, I would have given myself a terrible score. That's obviously not as heavily weighed.

Graduate programs aren't always preparing someone to be a teacher, right? But in my experience, most of the time, if you think you want to do that, and you want to try and get some experience in that, there's usually that opportunity. I think there were people at [Master's University] doing that. I know at [PhD University], I got enough of an opportunity, I guess. It seems that there's always those opportunities. And in fact, at [Current Institution], graduate students can go to the [teaching center] workshops, too. Some of them do. If they are interested

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in that, that's something to put on a resume, or a CV, that says I was a TA at least, and this is basically the bare minimum as far as I am concerned. And other than that, I personally don't care too much. I do evaluate it, and I give them a score on a scale from zero to ten on how experienced I think they are in teaching, but as long as it's at least a three, that's probably enough. I mean, if they've been a TA and their application is well written, then I expect that they are a good enough communicator.

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

I like doing teaching, I like my balance right now. Which is, right now I only teach one class a semester. We have a fraction of our department who essentially only teach, and we have a fraction who do research as well. So, the workload distribution is somewhat variable. In terms of teaching. I only teach one class a semester right now, since I'm considered fairly research intensive, which is nice. I usually switch off an undergrad class to a grad class by semester but this year, I only taught grad courses actually.

Basically, the president of the university wants us to become a metropolitan research university of distinction, or something like that. They want us to be doing more research. So, the emphasis has been shifting to graduate programs, graduating PhDs, but the irony in that is that I am not sure a lot of the administration and leaders at the state level know what that entails – I mean in terms of how many resources it requires to run a successful PhD program.

I have four PhD students in my group right now. They take up way more time than it takes me to teach my class. In terms of resources and time, it's like, you guys should be graduating PhDs but at the same time – oh, but they're just an afterthought, right – you should be graduating more PhDs. The emphasis has shifted, or is shifting, and that makes it hard for a lot of the folks who are more teaching intensive. I like doing research, and that's what I wanted to do when I came in to it. Most new faculty in engineering, that's their intention. That shift [towards research] does not bother me whatsoever, but if you haven't been doing research for five or ten years, how are you going to restart doing research? What are you going to do? That's challenging.

[Current Institution] is hugely supportive of evidence based instructional practices and achieving better outcomes with newer techniques. There are several very large grants, like NSF

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grants that are supporting evidence based instructional practices, particularly in engineering and sciences, or in STEM, and that is a huge emphasis. So, the fact that I've done it a couple times or tried it, or starting to develop those materials and look at what's happening in my classroom, and at least try it, that's seen as positive basically.

Our dean is actually very aware of who's doing that. Surprisingly aware of it, somehow. I don't know how or why, but she will, in college wide meetings will call out people who are doing some of those more interactive learning type style or techniques or flipping the classroom in their classes. And she'll push toward that, and be like, any of you who aren't doing it or are unsure, or want to but are unsure, talk to some of these folks.

What tenure looks like here

I'm pretty sure I'll get tenured at this point. The dean said something a few weeks ago – I mentioned something about tenure, and she essentially said you're getting tenure, don't worry. I'm like, well, ok, I mean I'm not too worried. I never was worried about it though. There is this really good article in The Scientific American Blog: "The Awesomest Seven Year Postdoc" written by Radhika Nagpal in 2013. Also titled "how I learned to stop worrying and love the tenure track faculty life." She's basically saying, do what you want to do, do your best, view it as a time to have fun, and if you don't get tenure go do something else fun. It's not like it's the end of the world if you don't get it. I'm not too worried about it, and I never have been too worried about it. It's a really good article and I do take that to be my view on it.

What we do at [Current Institution is] we submit an annual evaluation. It's actually really nice. They're helpful to us in terms of making us, basically, make our tenure portfolio, so that at the end we're not scrambling to figure out what we did five years ago and mark down every detail. And that's about it. Every year you get a letter from your tenure committee and the dean, saying you've done this, and this, and this well. You need to work more on this, and this, and this. Making great progress, or not.

I get a really high rate of return on my course evaluations too, and all of my evaluations are generally good, so I don't know. I haven't had any comments about teaching. We have [a teaching center] on campus, and they offer workshops and stuff, so I've gone to a few workshops

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and taken a week-long class with them. I think I'll get the feedback, oh take more [teaching center] workshops, but other than that, teaching is ok. So, for me, it hasn't really been an issue.

I remember another faculty member was driving me around during my interview, and was like, yeah, the bar for tenure – if you get one pretty good grant as PI before you go up, you're probably going to be alright. So that first year I submitted several proposals, and literally the first one I ever submitted as faculty, I got. I submitted it in September 2013, and I got it, which was pretty ironic. And so, I was immediately feeling pretty good about things, and then – I remember very specifically, I was talking to that very same faculty and he said, don't think you got tenure in the bag already. I didn't actually feel like I had it in the bag. It's a good launching point, but it's not all I'm going to do productivity-wise. I won't be like, alright, I got it in the bag and that's it. I think the process is fairly straightforward, and honestly maybe the bar is a little too low in a lot of ways.

When I go up for tenure, I think they'll come in and observe [my teaching]. But mostly it's based on student evaluations. Every semester, I make my students in my class do their evaluations by cleverly offering them all a bunch of extra credit. Which then they all do the evaluations, and then they all get extra credit points, so it really doesn't get them much except for making them feel good.

I am a big grass-is-always-greener kind of guy. Of course, we have problems. There are faculty that don't get along and always seem to be at each other's throats. We definitely have issues with research and administrative support. Even though we are trying to grow research programs, it's [Current State]. When I came here, you know, my advisor was like, hey don't forget, the state of [Current State] has the same number of people as the city of [PhD city], like in the whole state. So, the resources – there's not a lot of money available and they don't put a ton of money into it. So, there are definitely still some challenges. But at the same time, the expectations are a lot lower. My wife and I ended up having a third kid! And then, it was like, ok, now what?

But it's nice that the bar is not set ridiculously high. Sometimes I obviously feel like I'm totally swamped, but other times I feel a little bit stressed, or more relaxed. It's been fun for the most part. I mean, I guess the great thing for me about faculty is the flexibility. That's the main thing. You work more hours at lower pay, but at least they can be flexible. I have a good friend,

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one of the faculty in [another department] is a good friend of mine now, and we go fishing and camping together, and we can – when we have the opportunity, we can take a Friday off and just ditch out of work and go fishing, which is awesome to me. And so, it's been about what I expected, honestly.

I didn't desire it [the lower expectations], I think I fell into it. I always have pushed myself pretty hard, and had high expectations for myself. So, it's more of like falling into this position and my expectations for myself kind of exceed what they are from the university side. It would bother me if I didn't want to work hard and was being pushed, pushed, pushed anyway.

Other thoughts

Let me tell you this: I [have] to be honest about [Current State], it doesn't seem like there are as many people around that are highly driven. I mean, most people, even in their normal jobs do that kind of stuff. I mean like, take some days off. People love their time off here. They love taking off on a Thursday evening or afternoon to go camping for a long weekend or something like that. That's just the pace of life here. My wife and I talk about this with a lot of our friends. Most of our friends are a little more like us, and it's just a common theme in everybody, apparently, that works around here, where it seems like there might be a percentage of people who aren't quite as serious about their job. Like their life is not their job. Which is, in a lot of ways, a good thing. And so, it reduces stress in a lot of ways, but like I said, sometimes it adds to stress as well. But no, I haven't had a problem adjusting to it. Not so far.

Historically, [Current Institution] has I think too often been used as a stepping stone. People get into that faculty position and then move up to somewhere they want to be. I don't view it that way. I mean, I love it here. And I believe a lot of the folks who were hired around the same time as me are that way too. I don't think that they viewed it coming in as that. There are enough good things going on and enough excitement that I think they knew what they were getting in to and they are still happy to be here. We know that we are not R1. So, we are looking for people who are going to come in and be good at what they do and a good asset for us and hopefully aren't just going to jump ship after two years.