

Considering Careers In Music: Is An Academic Job Right For Me?

During my early studies as an undergraduate, and as a first-generation college student, the thought of eventually entering academia as a professor of music seemed beyond the realm of possibilities. Originally, I intended to finish my bachelor's degree and then to teach as an independent piano teacher. In my junior year, that plan underwent revisions to include the completion of a master's degree, and during my first year of graduate school, I revised that new plan to continue my studies as a doctoral student. In hindsight, my primary motivation to extensively prolong my student life came from an intense love of learning and a love for the culture of academia. My secondary motivation emanated from a strong desire for job security. While the prospect of life as an independent teacher held promise, a university position seemed the ideal way to reliably support my family. Nevertheless, the scarcity of university positions seemed daunting. Bill

Deresiewicz, a former Yale English professor, recently related his sobering advice to prospective graduate students, "You're going to be in school for at least seven years, probably more like nine, and there's a very good chance that you won't get a job at the end of it."¹ With these words in mind today, as a hired graduate (albeit a pre-tenured one), I frequently reflect on how thankful I am for my current university position.

The saturation of the academic job market should be a major factor when considering the prospect of a life in academia, but this is stating the obvious. A consideration that I had not truly explored as a graduate student was the nature of day-to-day life as a university professor and how I might be completely prepared for it. Most of what I learned about life in academia came from seeing my own professors at work as teachers. That perspective led to a rather narrow view since I did not understand the rest of their duties involving research and service. The following discussion offers my perspective as a junior faculty member in hopes of providing a clearer picture of the academic music profession to anyone considering graduate school and the possibility of a future career in academia.

As mentioned above, a university's mission priorities will significantly affect a professor's responsibilities. A typical model for a balanced load at a teaching and research institution is 40 percent teaching, 40 percent research and 20 percent service. Those ratios shift

based on the focus of the institution and would be quite different for a music conservatory. A "teaching" university or conservatory might increase the emphasis on teaching and service while reducing the research load. Based on a faculty member's unique role in the department or school, the supervisor may choose to alter a load based on the professor's area of expertise. However, this type of alteration seems more common for tenured faculty.

Initially, the example ratio above, 40/40/20, appears straightforward. One might picture scheduling available time according to the weight of the selected task. I remember that during my new-hire orientation several tenured faculty members came to speak about the tenure promotion process. One remarked that the 40/40/20 load was a nice concept but that in actual practice a professor's duties were closer to 100/100/100. In response, we attendees chuckled (a bit nervously), but as years passed, I increasingly understood the significance of this remark. In particular, my teaching load consumes an enormous amount of time. "Teaching" at a university includes much more than contact time spent in the classroom or in applied lessons. It includes time for office hours, student mentoring, course preparation, curriculum and assessment development, grading, managing online course materials and more. Depending on how you manage your communication with students, e-mail also consumes a significant portion of the day. With pedagogy as

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my principal emphasis, I tend to place a great deal of importance on the teaching portion of my load, but this seems to be a trend for university professors in any given field.

The research duties of music faculty members vary greatly. The many endeavors of performers and composers fall under the category of "creative works" while the work of musicologists, theorists and music educators fit the more typical mold of university research (experimental, historical, descriptive and the like). For the most part, your choice of doctoral degree prepares you for the work you will pursue as a faculty member. Those with D.M.A. degrees are likely to pursue creative works while those with Ph.D. degrees engage in various forms of

research, but depending on your position and university, these expectations vary. At large research institutions, the old adage "publish or perish" holds true, and they expect your work to regularly appear in top-tier journals, or in the case of creative works, in nationally and internationally recognized venues. Unlike publication or performance opportunities, service possibilities are relatively easy to come by. For me, service work is sandwiched somewhere between my diurnal teaching duties and nocturnal research, writing and practicing. My on-campus service activities include participation in university committees, organizing departmental events and giving guest lectures or workshops; the opportunities for off-campus service are unlimited.

Preparation for teaching, research and service responsibilities essentially begins in graduate school. In particular, gaining teaching experience as a graduate assistant is excellent preparation for a future faculty position. You should augment that teaching experience by working with your own private teaching studio when possible. In addition, your participation with professional organizations is critical to future success. MTNA offers many options to student members including the possibility of conference workshops and poster presentations. Many state associations offer their own unique professional activities to student members. The College Music Society also makes a special effort to provide opportunities for students to present their creative efforts

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at regional and national conferences. They even offer funding for students to offset travel expenses. Your participation in these professional organizations will build your vita and expand your level of experience with the academic activities of your future colleagues. It will also increase your network of professional contacts. Remember that an outstanding GPA will not be enough to make you an attractive candidate for an academic position. To stand out from the crowd, you must do everything you can in graduate school to increase the level of your teaching experience and competence while simultaneously engaging in professional creative activities. For more perspective on this preparation process, I recommend reading *The Chicago Guide to Your Academic Career*.² It presents an informal discussion between colleagues regarding preparation for life in academia beginning with graduate school and culminating with tenure.

If you have completed a master's degree and are considering pursuing a doctorate, prepare for a greater level of commitment in time and energy. Achieving a doctorate requires an unprecedented level of dedication and the willingness to make significant personal sacrifices. For perspective on the academic hurdles awaiting doctoral students, read *The Formation of Scholars: Rethinking Doctoral Education for the Twenty-First Century*.³ It will mentally prepare you for the array of expectations you will face and offers an insightful analysis of the purpose of the degree requirements. Before you choose a doctoral program, spend time thinking about how your unique skills and how your degree choice and research interests will distinguish you in the job search pool. You will be thankful you did when submitting an application with more than 100 other applicants competing for a single university position.



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This brief discussion barely scratches the surface of the complexities of life in academia. My own experiences in graduate school, and now as junior faculty at a teaching and research institution, certainly informs this discussion. Anyone seriously considering an academic career should seek advice from many different sources. Speak with professors at various types of universities in different positions and at different stages in their careers for perspective regarding the challenges they have faced and their current responsibilities. These challenges offer a significant deterrent to anyone considering this career option, but for the right person, a life in academia offers great

rewards. For many, the stimulating university environment fosters creativity and excellence. On campus, the quality of your colleagues is unrivaled—they will likely be hard-working people with an amazing level of dedication to teaching and research within their respective fields. While the diversity of faculty duties offers challenges in time-management, it keeps day-to-day life interesting and fresh. In addition, your students will tend to be intrinsically motivated and a joy to teach. Finally, remember that while the level of competition for academic positions is daunting, it is within the realm of possibility for dedicated and determined musicians. ♪

Notes

1. William Deresiewicz, "Faulty Towers: The Crisis in Higher Education," *The Nation* (May 23, 2011), <http://www.thenation.com/article/160410/faulty-towers-crisis-higher-education> (accessed May 20, 2011).

2. John Goldsmith, John Komlos, and Penny Schine Gold, *The Chicago Guide to Your Academic Career: A Portable Mentor for Scholars from Graduate School through Tenure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

3. George Walker, et al., *The Formation of Scholars: Rethinking Doctoral Education for the Twenty-First Century* (San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass, 2008).

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