

Five teaching-stream professors tell their stories

It's an alternative career track that they say fits them well.

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Teaching-stream faculty – professors whose main responsibilities are teaching, with few or no research obligations – is a term that can still generate controversy. Some faculty members have voiced concerns that these positions may lead to a two-tier system, unfair teaching loads and truncated career trajectories. And yet, there are many professors out there who find that this alternative career track fits them well. We introduce you to five teaching-stream appointees and how they came to be in, and are enjoying, their current positions.

The interactive instructor



Sometimes associate professor Fiona Rawle looks out at her students as they write their final exam in her first-year Introduction to Evolution and Evolutionary Genetics class and notices them twitching and gesturing. But Dr. Rawle doesn't worry – she knows they're just reconstructing DNA the way she taught them to. “In first year, students have to learn the structure of a DNA molecule, so I get every person in the class to form a molecule with their body and we make a giant DNA chain,” she explains.

The activity is just one way that Dr. Rawle makes her classroom interactive, even in classes as large as her 900-student introductory courses. Other methods include Skyping with experts, using clickers for her second-year Introductory Genetics class and assigning students to write practical grant applications in her fourth-year Molecular Basis of Disease capstone course. Outside of class, she takes active learning to a literal level by inviting students, during her office hours, to join her for walks around campus. “We hike together and talk about all sorts of stuff, about the class as well as other science things,” says Dr. Rawle.

One of four teaching-stream professors in the biology department at the University of Toronto Mississauga, Dr. Rawle joined the university in 2010 and was promoted to a permanent associate professor position in 2015. Previously, she worked for three years as a sessional instructor at Wilfrid Laurier University after completing a PhD at Queens University in pathology and molecular medicine and a postdoctorate in Japan. She says she works

collaboratively with her teaching-stream colleagues on science education projects and can take sabbaticals similar to tenure-stream professors. “As a teaching-stream member, I feel respected and supported in the science-education research I want to do,” says Dr. Rawle. Promotion is based on classroom visits as well as a teaching dossier showing courses developed, publications and presentations related to teaching, and feedback from students.

With her attention focused squarely on students, Dr. Rawle says she likes witnessing their progress through the program and beyond. “I love hearing back from students. I’ll get emails from students that I taught ... and they will remember something that happened in class. That’s really rewarding.”

The one with an across-the-pond perspective



Simon Bates has not only worked on both sides of the Atlantic, but on both sides of the promotion track as well. In 2012, he became one of the first four appointments into the University of British Columbia’s newly minted professor of teaching rank, a status that today includes 20 faculty members. The position is intended to mirror the full professor position in the research and teaching stream, only with outstanding teaching and educational leadership as the requirements for promotion. While UBC has had a tenured teaching track for two decades, until 2012 the rank only went up to senior instructor (the equivalent of associate professor). Today Dr. Bates is seconded to the provost’s office as senior advisor for teaching and learning, and is also academic director at UBC’s Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology. He still co-teaches a course in his home discipline of physics and astronomy.

Following a doctorate in physics from the University of Manchester and several postdoctoral positions, the U.K. native was appointed to his first faculty position in the physics department at the University of Edinburgh in 2000. While his appointment involved research and graduate student supervision, his interest was already long drawn to teaching. He then moved to other term positions at Edinburgh, including an appointment in the department of chemistry (his research straddles the disciplines), and as dean of learning and teaching for the faculty of sciences and engineering. From there he became the first person in his faculty, in 2008, to be appointed to a full professor rank for contributions to teaching scholarship and leadership.

Working in two faculties at the same university, Dr. Bates said he learned that departmental attitude makes all the difference in terms of respect for teaching. In the chemistry department, first-year teaching was “absolutely prized,” he says. “It was widely regarded as a great honour to be asked to teach first-year courses, the opportunity to shape students’ development as emerging experts within the field,” he recalls. The attitude in the physics department stood in stark contrast. “First-year teaching was seen as almost beneath some faculty,” he says.

Dr. Bates saw UBC’s new teaching rank as evidence of a positive attitude extending even more widely, a fact that motivated him to make the move to Canada. “UBC is a school that actually thinks it can do both sides of its core mandate, so it can be a world-class research institution, but it can also be internationally recognized for outstanding teaching. That’s a feeling that I had when I arrived, and that I still feel now, four years later.”

The straight talker



Anyone who sees Jennifer Stamp in the next few months should take a moment to congratulate her—she is one of the most recent appointees to the highest rank of the teaching stream at Dalhousie University, the newly created “teaching fellow” position. Made permanent in the department of psychology and neuroscience in 2006, she had held the position of senior instructor until early December 2015 when she received the promotion.

Perhaps a bigger milestone was the moment when the Cambridge-educated professor began to recognize her own success, to not feel like she was settling for less. “It took me a long time to be happy with this position,” says Dr. Stamp of the teaching stream. “I don’t know if that was self-imposed. I know I’ve had a number of people tell me ‘you’re wasting your Cambridge PhD.’” She says there wasn’t a particular turning point, although a very productive early sabbatical and the opportunity to do new things helped. “I just decided that I liked what I was doing,” says Dr. Stamp.

Teaching at Dalhousie, Dr. Stamp has come full circle, as she completed her undergraduate degree in the same department where she now teaches. She returned in 2000 for her first postdoctoral position, which is when she also started teaching part-time. She was invited to apply for the teaching stream in 2003 and has moved up the ranks ever since, securing her permanent position on the strength of teaching accomplishments that include textbook

authorship, working as undergraduate chair, leading the department's move into online course development and, of course, the all-important student evaluations. Since her department encourages research efforts even among teaching faculty, she continues to make a small output in her field of stress and addiction. Her typical teaching load is eight courses, including a 1,000-student first-year introductory psychology course, and courses in neuroscience, drugs and behavior, and social psychology.

Although there is still progress to be made, Dr. Stamp says she has seen an improvement in attitude towards teaching-stream faculty in her time at the university. "The administration seems to be a lot more interested in student issues and student engagement, and obviously teaching is what matters most to undergrads, especially in first and second year – having good teachers rather than good researchers. But they needn't be mutually exclusive. There are plenty of awesome researchers here who are also fantastic teachers."

As for whether she would ever try to swim over to the other stream, Dr. Stamp says doing so would be incredibly difficult, and she doesn't think it would be worthwhile at this point. "I don't miss the uncertainty [of applying for research funding] and trying to justify your existence all the time, which is really stressful. The professoriate has to go through that and I don't. I don't think I'd trade that now, since especially with cuts to research funding it's much more difficult than it was 10 years ago," she says.

The trailblazer



Sheila Sammon may not be the type to brag, but that doesn't hide the fact that she will forever be on record at McMaster University as the first instructor promoted to full professor in the teaching stream. It's a trajectory that began in 1985, when Ms. Sammon started as a part-time sessional instructor in the school of social work. She quickly moved into a half-time position, then by 1990 to the first of many contractually limited appointments. By the time McMaster introduced teaching-track positions in 2007, she had already been promoted to associate professor. Her position was converted to teaching track and she was granted permanence, one of two to be granted that status.

Until recently, Ms. Sammon was also responsible for educational components of the social-work field placements (students are required to complete 780 practicum hours), such as

training field instructors as mentors. In July 2014, she was appointed director of community engagement for the whole university, connecting students at all levels with the community. Throughout, 40 percent of her role remains focused on teaching: her current courses include Foundations of Community Engagement, a graduate course on Critical Frameworks for Social Work Practice, and Social Work Practice with Families.

With a master's degree from the University of Toronto, Ms. Sammon says she was always interested in teaching (she did practise as a social worker for the first few years of her career), and says that helped her develop a reputation for it. For instance, when the university moved to inquiry-based education, she was one of the professors invited to pilot the approach. She's often asked to mentor new teachers and has taken on service roles on the academic integrity committee, the senate committee on teaching professors and a role on the accreditation body for her professional community.

She credits her department with recognizing her interest in teaching as an asset. "They've always valued what someone who had a specialty in teaching – and, in my case, a specialty in practice – can contribute to student learning and to the department," says Ms. Sammon. Provided that they're not burdened with an unreasonable teaching load, she says teaching-stream professors can often take up interesting projects that their colleagues may have to turn down due to their heavier research loads. And she also gets to advise on the most interesting research project of all – students' futures. "That's another exciting part of teaching: helping students sort through where they want to go in their world, and seeing that the next generation is actually prepared and willing to start addressing real-world problems."

The CLA-turned-alternate stream



While some may think of philosophy as fairly theoretical, one of Stefan Rodde's most profound teaching moments came from witnessing an applied argument. Listening to a pair of students work their way through an assigned Socratic debate, he found himself thoroughly convinced by the first student's argument. "I thought, 'Wow, that's amazing. There's no way they can knock that down.' Then the other person turned it right around. That was a really good feeling to me: students weren't just memorizing what I was telling them to do. They were taking it and doing things with it that I hadn't really expected," he says.

Dr. Rodde was one of two “alternate stream” teaching lecturers hired to York University’s faculty of liberal arts and professional studies in 2014, a stream designated to be primarily teaching-focused, with no basic research requirement (although some service is also part of the job). In the position, which is tenurable, he teaches mostly first- and second-year courses, which he loves for those lightbulb moments. “In first year-students, especially, you see a huge leap forward. Often arguments that people who’ve been studying philosophy for years can take for granted, they’ve never heard before. I really enjoy seeing that happen.” He pushes that opportunity for insight further by incorporating segments from popular media, such as ads from the recent federal election or clips from *The Daily Show*.

Dr. Rodde says the alternate-stream appointments are the first of their kind in 20 years. There had been a brief spate of alternate-stream hiring in the early 1990s, according to a media relations spokesperson, and this began again after ratification of the most recent collective agreement. According to that agreement, York is required to make six “conversions” from the faculty’s long-service contract teaching pool to the alternate stream in each of the three years covered by the agreement.

Since his appointment followed six years of teaching in a contractually limited appointment, or CLA, at McMaster University (where he also did his MA and PhD in Ancient Greek philosophy), Dr. Rodde is able to compare the differences between being contract and permanent. Although he says McMaster treated him well, the change in status makes him feel more a part of his new department, participating in faculty meetings and policy planning.

While Dr. Rodde says he wouldn’t rule out moving to the professorial stream (York has that option, provided instructors meet the research and other requirements, although the move is unusual), he sees himself continuing in the alternate stream. “When I finished my PhD, I realized that teaching is what I really enjoy doing, and I enjoy it more than research. When this position came up, I realized that this was the kind of position I wanted.”