So You Want to Teach in Higher Education?

What kind of education do you need to be able to teach in a college or university? The answer depends on what level or Carnegie classification (http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/) you wish to teach at as well as other matters.

Community Colleges

Each state will have its own rules, so if you are targeting a particular state, go to their website and look for the information. Or look at a particular community college employment site to see what they are requiring. Tennessee requires that an instructor have 18 credits of coursework at the graduate level in the discipline you want to teach. However, community colleges in urban areas often have multiple applicants to positions so they can often hire individuals with master’s degrees in the discipline they will teach.

The certificate in community college teaching and leadership (see http://www.memphis.edu/lead/hiad/cc-certificate.htm) is not a teaching certificate for community college teachers. K-12 teachers do need teacher certification, but instructors in higher education do not.

Four-Year Colleges

Here is where the location of the college is important as is the Carnegie level of the college and the discipline to be taught.

Master’s and doctoral-level institutions have program and institutional accreditation standards that they must meet, and generally, these require that instructors have a degree above the course level they are teaching and that the degree be in the field that they are teaching. Individuals teaching undergraduates must have a master’s degree and those teaching master’s or doctoral students must have the doctoral degree. And if you teach math, you will need a graduate degree in mathematics. In this instance, a doctoral degree in Adult Education or Higher Education may not be the best choice for you.

Here is the relevant language from SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools): faculty teaching undergraduate courses must “have a doctoral or master’s degree in the teaching discipline or a master’s degree with a concentration in the teaching discipline, and a minimum of eighteen (18) graduate semester hours in the teaching discipline.” Exceptions to these criteria may be granted when potential faculty members have skills or experience in the discipline that will materially contribute to the students’ educational experiences. Other accreditors may have different language.

However, sometimes more rural four-year colleges or disciplines with few doctoral programs have difficulty finding doctorally-trained individuals so they may be more amenable to individuals with the doctorate in Adult Education or Higher Education. Both of our Adult Education and Higher Education programs have several graduates in faculty positions but they are teaching in smaller colleges, in disciplines that have no or few doctoral programs, or they were hired with the expectation they would gain the doctorate as they taught for their institution.

Consider

You need to know that you can teach with a doctorate in Adult Education or Higher Education, but not everywhere. Generally, faculty who want to focus on enhancing their teaching are drawn to the Adult Education concentration and faculty considering an administrative career are drawn to the Higher Education concentration.

If you’d like to discuss this option further, contact one of the faculty and we would be happy to help you consider the pros and cons of various options.