# 39 Preparing for a Career at a Regional Comprehensive University

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## Introduction: What You Should Know about Regional Comprehensive Universities

Most casual observers think immediately of flagship research universities when they are asked about institutions of higher education. The association is understandable: these universities are extremely large and extremely visible, not only for their size and research productivity but for their athletic programs. Graduate students who did not attend regional comprehensive universities (RCUs) themselves are similarly more familiar with research institutions because they house most graduate programs. However, many—often most—academic positions graduate students survey while on the job market are not based at Research-1 (R1) universities or elite liberal arts colleges (SLACS); they are often located at RCUs. Indeed, in Wisconsin, where Eric and Monica teach (and research), most students in the University of Wisconsin System attend RCUs, not the more research-intensive universities in Madison and Milwaukee. Applying for jobs and working at RCUs is distinct in a variety of ways from employment experiences at other types of universities, yet graduate advisors may have limited knowledge with this type of university. In this chapter, we offer readers some things to keep in mind when considering positions at RCUs, as well as tips for curating a competitive application.

Regional comprehensive universities are public institutions that offer a wide array of bachelor's degrees, as well as some master's level programs, and potentially a few doctoral programs. Some are part of university networks, while others operate as standalone entities. They vary in size from (typically) a couple of thousand students to upwards of twenty-thousand students in some cases.

For faculty, the biggest difference between RCUs and R1 institutions concerns the ratio of the universal components of academic positions: teaching, research, and service. Relative to primarily research institutions, RCUs place more emphasis on teaching and less on scholarship.[1] Teaching four courses per semester is common, though it can vary between and within universities and university systems. Research expectations for promotion and tenure are lower than at more research-oriented programs, and more emphasis is placed on performance in the classroom. Increasingly, RCU faculty are also expected to be able to teach (well!) in a variety of modalities, including face-to-face, hybrid, and online.

It is important to note that teaching-oriented does not mean teaching-exclusive. Faculty at RCUs are still scholars! These universities have Institutional Review Boards, undergraduate (and graduate) research programs, sabbaticals, grants, labs, and even conference funding. True, these resources may not be as well-endowed as they are at more research-focused institutions, and teaching is the bulk of most faculty members' professional lives at an RCU, but many programs vigorously support the generation

and dissemination of scholarship. Just as there are often fantastic instructors at R1 universities, there can be top-notch scholars who call RCUs home. Indeed, as we will discuss below, working at teaching-intensive universities provides unique research opportunities that scholars at other universities may not have.

Students at RCUs are incredibly diverse. These institutions draw applicants from a variety of socioeconomic and academic backgrounds. Among all types of four-year colleges, RCUs enroll the largest proportions of underrepresented students—including military veterans, adult learners, ethnic minorities, first-generation students, and immigrants (Orphan, 2018). Some are high achievers that would thrive at almost any institution of higher education; others are lower performers who would likely never gain admission to more selective schools. Many are paying for school themselves, and therefore work at least part-time; indeed, it is not uncommon to work with individuals who are full-time students and full-time workers. RCUs are also common destinations for first-generation and non-traditional students, and often draw a disproportionate number of Pell Grant recipients. This environment offers incredible opportunities for engagement; however, instructors must be prepared to deliver content to an audience comprising students with a variety of schedules, preferences, and needs. Working with students from diverse, and sometimes disadvantaged, backgrounds can be very rewarding, especially when you see firsthand the transformative effect of higher education students and their contributions to the broader community.

## Applying For a Position at an RCU

A common mistake when applying to a regional comprehensive university is to treat the application as if it were for an R1 or SLAC. Search committees can easily identify applicants who are applying for the position because they are looking for a job, not because they are interested in the advertised position. Generally, RCUs are looking for applicants who are committed first to teaching and second to research. The application to an RCU should demonstrate this commitment by specifying your ideas on instruction, discussing your pedagogy, and demonstrating your knowledge of the university. If you have teaching experience, be specific about how you connect with students in the classroom, how you cover the course material, and how you have implemented ingenuity in your assignments. In addition, address how your overall pedagogy aligns with the department's or university's goals. Show that you are interested in the university by noting how your pedagogy serves the demographics of the student body.

Much like the application process, the department seeks a colleague who understands that teaching is a priority at their institution. While on the interview, it is necessary to demonstrate that you are the 'right fit' for the position by arriving prepared. The objective of the search committee is to identify the candidate that will be a utility player for the department. Resources are limited at RCUs and any way in which a job candidate can help fulfill roles will impress the department. Be prepared to discuss the specifics of your teaching strategies and the different classes or areas in which you would be interested in teaching. Search committees are looking for more than general ideas about your pedagogy, so the more detail that you can provide about the structure of your assignments, how you engage students in the classroom, and sometimes specific readings, will be important. If there are distinct ways you can help to connect the campus to the local community or serve the economic, civic, or cultural needs of the region, this is worth mentioning, too. Think broadly about your teaching, research, and public service.

Applicants should prepare a list of standard questions and institution-specific questions to ask during the interview. Standard questions include information about the position, teaching load, the tenure process, benefits, and the future of the department. It is also important to ask about the resources available to support teaching and research if that has not already been made clear to you during your visit. Institution-specific questions will vary depending on the interests of the applicant and the programs of the university and its surrounding community. Applicants should investigate programs distinct to the university that align with their scholarly interests. For example, Monica was interested in mentoring undergraduate student research and asked for additional information on those programs during her interview. Most likely, you will meet with at least one student, or a group of students, during the interview process. Student meetings present a wonderful opportunity to receive insight into the department's culture. Finally, ask for information related to your hobbies or interests within the community of your

university's town. These queries help search committees gauge the likelihood that the applicant will remain at the university. Questions like these are mutually beneficial; to the department, they demonstrate a real interest in the position. To the candidate, these questions help identify how to engage at the university in a way that fulfills the applicant's personal and professional goals.

Negotiating an offer at an RCU bears some similarities to other institutions (see chapter 46 on negotiating an offer). Monica's dissertation advisor lent her invaluable advice for negotiating at an RCU. Create a list with three categories: (1) what you must have to be successful, (2) what you would really like to help you be successful, and (3) what would be an added bonus. By dividing up your negotiation list in this manner, you can prioritize items in column one during the negotiation. Categorizing your asks in this manner will also help you create justifications for those requests. Monica and Eric, for example, use Stata for nearly all their research projects and could spend a larger time discussing why this program would be necessary for successfully earning tenure.

RCUs generally have more latitude negotiating on one-time expenses like hardware, software, first-year course releases, start-up research funds, and moving expenses than they do on base salary. However, you should ask for what you need with the abilities of the institution in mind. For example, if you require a start-up fund to help you complete research projects, then that item should be categorized in column one. Be realistic and flexible when setting the funding amount. While rare, Deans who believe that candidates are inflexible about their requests during negotiation may rescind the offer.

## Teaching at RCUs: More Classes Can Be a Good Thing

There is no doubt about it: RCUs are teaching-intensive institutions. Six to eight courses a year (not including summer instruction) is the norm, and many instructors manage three or even four different "preps" each term.[2] Other "teaching-adjacent" activities like advising may also be part of a professor's job duties at an RCU. Political scientists seeking appointments at RCUs need to love teaching and need to be prepared to be on-campus (if teaching fully face-to-face) more frequently than faculty at R1 universities.

It is important to note, though, that teaching more classes does not necessarily mean more total students. One of the benefits of teaching at an RCU is that the enormous, stadium-seating lecture courses for which many graduate students TA-ed are exceedingly rare! Instructors typically have classes in the twenty- to forty-student range. This more intimate setting provides several advantages. Most importantly, RCU faculty get to know their students on a personal level. In face-to-face courses, everyone is in a relatively small room where it is possible not only to learn names but routinely interact with a large share of the class on an individual basis. Indeed, classroom engagement can be higher in smaller spaces, and students are often more comfortable discussing challenging or sensitive material—like politics— in smaller groups. In addition, since RCUs are typically smaller than research-intensive universities, it is common to work with the same student over multiple years. Instructors get to know their students extremely well and mentor them both formally and informally. Internship placements, co-authoring, club advising, informal conversations, graduation or wedding celebrations, and joint community service are just a few of the ways these relationships develop.

## The Research: It's Still Possible

Most RCUs expect faculty to be actively engaged in academic research leading to publication. Faculty contracts, teaching loads, and annual report templates reflect this expectation, with most institutions providing tenure track and tenured faculty with standardized assigned/release time for original research. At Indiana University's regional campuses, tenured and tenure-track faculty contracts typically specify a workload of 75% teaching and 25% research; faculty teach three classes per semester while the fourth course is replaced by "reassigned time" for research. In contrast, full-time lecturers teach a four to four load with no research requirement. Other RCU campuses (e.g., UW-Whitewater and Eastern Michigan University) assign tenure track faculty a four to four teaching load, while still expecting an active and ongoing research agenda. Unlike at community colleges, research is a significant part of faculty work, and promotion and tenure guidelines—and decisions—reflect the importance of balancing teaching

and research commitments.[3] Faculty are expected to maintain an active research agenda by presenting their work at conferences and publishing their work in books and academic journals. Many RCUs are willing to consider the scholarship of teaching and learning and the scholarship of engagement as part of a faculty member's research portfolio (see, for example, Loepp 2018). Graduate students considering employment at an RCU should prepare specific questions about how various activities like SoTL and community-based research are factored into reappointment, tenure, and promotion decisions.

Creative faculty members will find ways to create projects that combine teaching, research, and service—providing opportunities for recognition across all three areas of faculty life. For example, Elizabeth's students served as field workers for a randomized voter mobilization field experiment in the neighborhood surrounding the campus. By studying the results of this get-out-the-vote campaign on voters, Elizabeth was able to publish in a traditional peer-reviewed political science journal (Bennion, 2005). By studying student learning outcomes, she was able to publish in a peer-reviewed SoTL journal (Bennion, 2006). Meanwhile, the mobilization campaign itself was a form of community service that led to a grant from Indiana Campus Compact, an organization supporting public engagement projects designed for community impact.

Increasingly, regional universities value scholarship designed to serve the region by addressing community-defined issues, problems, or opportunities by collecting, analyzing, and reporting data in a methodologically rigorous but accessible way. Media interviews, op-eds, expert testimony, and public workshops can help new faculty to build a "research everywhere" narrative at institutions with heavy teaching and service expectations. Regional comprehensives allow a good deal of latitude to conduct research related to politics, how to teach politics, or how to use politics to engage and serve the community most effectively.

## Service Opportunities: Decide What's Meaningful to You

Service takes many forms at an RCU. At Indiana University's regional campuses, for example, faculty report on service to students, the department, the college, the campus, the university, the discipline, and the community. Service to students may include academic advising, club advising, letter writing, and other mentoring activities. Service to the department may include serving on a department-level committee (e.g., curriculum, assessment, PTR) or taking on a leadership role (e.g., chair or graduate program director). In larger departments, such positions may be full-time appointments, but in many others, the chair or program director receives a course release.

Service at the campus, academic unit, and campus levels usually involves committees and task forces that are central to the academic mission and to faculty governance. Job candidates should ask prospective department chairs and deans to determine the expected level, type, and amount of service required. Generally, department chairs will advise new faculty to limit their service as they adjust to the university, build their courses, and establish their research agenda.

RCUs often see themselves as "anchor institutions" and "stewards of place" based on their collective mission to provide access to higher education and to support the economic, civic, and cultural life of their regions (Scholars Strategy Network, 2018). Service-learning courses, community-based research, public service, and media interviews are just a few of the ways RCU faculty serve the public; many also serve on local (elected, appointed, or voluntary civic organization) boards. You will have time to identify appropriate service opportunities once hired. It is important to consider your teaching and research goals, how your service activities reflect your priorities, and the type of case you hope to build for tenure and/or promotion.[4]

Sometimes incoming and junior faculty are asked to assume significant administrative responsibility. If this is requested during your interview or first couple of years at an institution, consider how this service will affect your overall case for promotion. Also, consider the visibility of the work you perform on campus and in the community, and those who devote significant amounts of time may be eligible for grants and awards, and those who perform unusually high levels of service (e.g., advising all undergraduate majors or directing a campus-wide civic program) can (and should) negotiate for additional course releases.

## Summary

For any number of reasons, a position at a regional comprehensive university may not be an applicant's first choice. The demand of higher teaching loads and provision of service while maintaining an active research agenda can appear taxing. Upon closer examination, RCUs offer a rich and fulfilling career that allows academics to explore and build upon a variety of their interests, without the pressure to publish frequently in top-tier journals under threat of losing their jobs.

This chapter discusses the perspective of faculty who have built their careers at an RCU. Many RCUs were designed to serve the needs of the regional community. Student bodies at RCUs are often diverse with respect to age, ethnicity, first-generation students, and immigrants. While low-performers at RCUs are also common, helping to transform these students' lives is extremely rewarding. Applying to and accepting a job at an RCU is technically similar to other applications, but substantively different. The application should reflect an explicit discussion of pedagogy, teaching interests, how the applicant can act as a utility player for the department, and what type of service the applicant might perform for the campus or larger community. Compensation offered is typically lower than at R1s and highly competitive liberal arts colleges, however many academics have found that negotiating on one-time expenses was successful.

Expectations about tenure and promotion are, generally, clearly defined and explained. The specific ratio between time allocated to teaching, service, and research will vary by institution, but a higher percentage—with rare exceptions—will be dedicated to teaching. Fortunately, many RCUs classify activities outside of the classroom under the category of teaching. Developing a research program is still valued at RCUs, despite it seldom being the top priority for achieving promotion and tenure. Guidelines on tenure and promotion often require service to be dispersed at the various levels of the university: to the students, the department, the college, the university, the campus, and the discipline. Service to the community offers additional opportunities to intertwine your personal and professional goals.

A successful career at an RCU requires a passion for teaching. An emphasis on teaching does not preclude academics from exploring other enriching professional activities. Those who support greater access to higher education and who are eager to actively contribute to the community in which they live will find a career at an RCU particularly satisfying. There are opportunities to combine teaching, research, and service in unique ways that are fulfilling both professionally and personally.

## Possible Additional Resources

- https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/10/12/about-three-quarters-all-faculty-positions-are-tenure-track-according-new-aaup
- https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/08/22/study-finds-gains-faculty-diversity-not-tenure-track

## Endnotes

1 In recent years R1 institutions have developed teaching-focused positions often known as teaching professors. There is variation between tenure track, full-time non-tenure track, and adjunct instructors within each college or university. We wrote this chapter with the assumption that most graduate students are interested in tenure track positions, but it important to recognize that, while 80% of all faculty positions were tenure-track in the 1950s, only about 20% are now, and minoritized faculty are still less likely than white faculty in the United States to be offered a tenure-track position.

2 A "prep" refers to a distinct course to prepare and deliver. Since instructors may teach multiple sections of the same course, the number of preps is often smaller than the number of courses, though not always! When talking to potential employers, graduate students should ask departments what a typical prep load is, not merely the number of typical courses taught. An additional prep is certainly more work, but it can be considerably less work than an additional (unique) course.

3 Annual reports also track student, department, college, campus, and public service, which is expected even when not explicitly included in the contract.

4 While community colleges base tenure decisions primarily on teaching performance and R1 universities base tenure and promotion decisions primarily on research, some RCUs offer more flexibility, allowing faculty to define their own area of excellence. At Indiana University, for example, faculty make a case for "excellence" in one area (teaching, research, service), plus "satisfactory" performance in the other two areas.

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