

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

SPOTLIGHT

How to Write a Statement of Teaching Philosophy

By *Gabriela A. Montell*

MARCH 27, 2003

You've polished your CV and cover letter and lined up your letters of recommendation. Your application for a faculty position is ready, with one big exception: You're still struggling to write a statement of your teaching philosophy.

The task is daunting -- even for the most experienced Ph.D.'s -- but it's increasingly difficult to avoid, as a growing number of departments are requiring applicants to submit such statements in their job applications. We talked to dozens of professors and administrators to learn what they look for when they read a statement of teaching philosophy, and we assembled their advice on getting started and avoiding some costly mistakes. Here are their tips and a list of dos and don'ts:

Getting Started

“Do I even have a teaching philosophy?” you may ask yourself.

Of course you do, says Matt Kaplan, associate director of the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching at the University of Michigan. Every doctoral graduate has a teaching philosophy, whether or not they realize it. Let's face it, you may not be the most experienced instructor, but "you've been a student for a long time, and you've been in all types of classes, so you have opinions about teaching and learning and what works and doesn't work," he says.

If you don't have a lot of teaching experience, "think about the great teachers you've had and what made them so effective, what they did that inspired you to spend six years in graduate school at a cost of \$1,000 a month," says Andrew Green, a Ph.D. counselor in the Career Center at the University of California at Berkeley.

2-Minute Tips:



If you're still feeling overwhelmed by the task at hand, try to focus on concrete questions, as opposed to the abstract question of "What's my philosophy?" says Mr. Kaplan.

“Breaking down that broad question into component parts -- for example, What do you believe about teaching? What do you believe about learning? Why? How is that played out in your classroom? How does student identity and background make a difference in how you teach? What do you still struggle with in terms of teaching and student learning? -- is often easier,” he says. “Those more concrete questions get you thinking, and then you can decide what you want to expand on.”

Another useful tip is to think about what you don't like in a teacher, says Cynthia Petrites, assistant director for graduate services for the humanities in the Career and Placement Services office at the University of Chicago. “Reflecting on what you don't like can give you insights about what you do like,” and that can help you to define your own teaching philosophy and goals, she says.

Do Some Research

“Different institutions have different expectations, depending on their mission and how they view the role of teaching within the broader responsibilities of being a faculty member,” says Mr. Green.

Does the college have a religious mission? Does it have an environmental mission? If so, you'd better address the mission in your statement, he says. While your teaching philosophy may stay the same, your teaching style may vary depending on your audience. So if you're applying to various types of institutions -- evangelical colleges, community colleges, liberal-arts colleges, and state universities -- you may need to write several different statements, Mr. Green says.

Before you start writing, look closely at the job ad and the institution's Web site. Look to see if the teaching philosophies of the faculty members are on the site. Find out how large the institution is and what the institution values.

You need to know about class size and what kinds of students you'll be teaching, so you'll know what to stress in your statement, because above all, the search committee will be looking to see if you understand what's expected of you at their institution, says Brian Wilson, chairman of the department of comparative religion at Western Michigan University. "You don't want to pitch large auditorium classes to a liberal-arts college, because they don't do that. That's not their style. Their mission is to give personal service to students. Whereas here at Western, we've got 35,000 students. We're a school that offers education to a wide variety of people, and we have large classes, so if you have experience teaching large classes, that's important and would be essential to put into a teaching statement."

Don't Rehash Your Vita

A teaching philosophy isn't a laundry list of what you've done, says Mr. Green. "I've read a lot of first drafts that were simply recitations of students' past teaching history - 'I've had six semesters as a teaching assistant at Berkeley and I've taught Introduction to Comparative Politics twice.' Well, you know, maybe you taught them all poorly. How do I know, unless you tell me what you learned as a teaching assistant about effective teaching and how you're going to implement it?"

The first rule of thumb is "to focus not so much on what courses you've taught, but on how it is you go about teaching," he says. "Don't make the mistake of recapitulating what's already in your CV."

Don't Make Empty Statements

Good statements and bad statements frequently start the same (with a broad philosophical declaration), but good ones anchor the general in something concrete (in an example that one can visualize), Ms. Petrites says. Anyone can talk about teaching in an idyllic sense; you need to give examples.

“If you say you work to encourage collaboration in the classroom, then explain how you do that, or if you’re a new teacher, how you would do that,” she says. “It’s easy to say, ‘I want to encourage collaboration in the classroom,’ or ‘I want to get students to think more critically’ and leave it at that. But who doesn’t want to do that?”

Empty statements are a dime a dozen, says David Haney, chairman of the English department at Appalachian State University. “Ninety percent of the statements I see include the sentence, ‘I run a student-centered classroom.’ My response to that is, ‘Duh. If you don’t, there’s something wrong with you.’ Do not ever use that phrase, unless you plan to follow it up with what kinds of things you have students do, what specific teaching techniques you’ve found successful. Otherwise it sounds like you’re just saying what you think I want to hear.”

Keep It Short

If there’s a page limit, stick to it. “If they say they want one to two pages, don’t give them five pages,” says Mr. Haney. You may have a lot to say, but you don’t want to overwhelm the search committee.

Ground Your Teaching Philosophy in Your Discipline

One way to avoid becoming mired in generalities is to share some insights about teaching in your particular field, Mr. Haney says. For example, if you’re applying for a job in an English department teaching literature courses, you might talk about why you think it’s important for students to read literature and how you plan to teach them to interpret it, he says. Describing your theoretical approach and/or what kinds of exercises you assign students will make your statement more engaging.

Make Sure It’s Well-Written

“Like everything else in your application, it’s a writing sample,” so make sure your statement is well-written, Mr. Haney says. “It’s a chance for you to demonstrate how articulate you are. Hiring committees, especially in English and the humanities, are going to look very closely at your writing.”

Adopt a Tone of Humility

Be careful not to sound as if you know all there is to know about teaching, warns Bill Pannacker, an assistant professor of English at Hope College. Most applicants believe they won’t be hired unless they already know everything, so “they tend to glorify their successes and present a picture of seamless perfection, which is unbelievable. I feel alienated from them because I can’t imagine myself being as perfect, even after years of experience, as they present themselves as being with only a few years of experience. It’s pretty presumptuous, if you ask me.”

Good teaching comes from years of trial and error, so a little humility is in order. “I’d rather read statements from candidates who talk about their mistakes and go on from there to describe how they learned from them to become better teachers,” says Mr. Pannacker.

Applicants also would be wise to avoid using superlatives, unless they want to sound arrogant. “It’s much better to say, ‘My student evaluations are consistently high’ than to say ‘My students say I’m the best teacher they’ve ever had,’” says Gene C. Fant Jr., chairman of the English department at Union University. And don’t use Latin quotations, he adds. “A lot of the statements I’ve seen start off with Latin, and to me, that’s just pompous. We already have enough pompous people in higher education. We don’t need them in our own department.”

Remember That Teaching Is About the Students

New teachers often devote their statements to showing that they can be innovative or that they can incorporate sophisticated concepts in a classroom, but they seldom mention how students reacted to those innovations and concepts, says Ms. Petrites of Chicago. “It’s important to present a picture of yourself in a classroom with students. Otherwise readers may ask, ‘Was this all about you or the students?’”

When you mention your students, be sure to convey enthusiasm toward them rather than condescension, says Mary Cullinan, dean of arts and sciences at California State University-Stanislaus. “Writers of teaching statements may come across as exasperated with students if they talk about how flawed the students are, how their writing skills aren’t as good as they should be, or how they don’t attend class the way they should,” she says. That’s not the message you want to send to readers of your teaching statement. Your role as a teacher is to ensure that students learn, no matter how flawed you think they might be.

Don’t Ignore Your Research

By all means focus the statement on your teaching, but don’t downgrade your research, especially if you’re applying to a small liberal-arts college or a state university. “Some people think that any institution below a Research I won’t value research,” says ASU’s Mr. Haney, but many colleges want to see whether you can integrate your research and teaching.

One of the biggest trends at small colleges right now is “enhanced engagement of undergraduates and faculty research,” adds Berkeley’s Mr. Green. “They tell parents, ‘If you send Johnny here, he’s going to be involved in cutting-edge research with our faculty,’ so they’re looking for evidence that you’re going to be able to take undergraduates and utilize them in your research program.”

Get a Second Opinion

It's a good idea to ask other people to read your statement, says Union's Mr. Fant. Show it to your mentors, other faculty members, and peers, and if there's a center for teaching and learning on your campus, show it to someone there as well. Let them read it, and then go back to it a week later and revise it. Then have somebody else proofread it before you send it out.

Just Be Yourself

Good readers will know when you're exaggerating, boastful, or insincere. "I want to hear your authentic voice," says Mr. Pannacker of Hope College, "rather than the written equivalent of the beauty-pageant smile."

In the end, that's what will make you credible and maybe even help persuade a search committee to bring you in for an interview.

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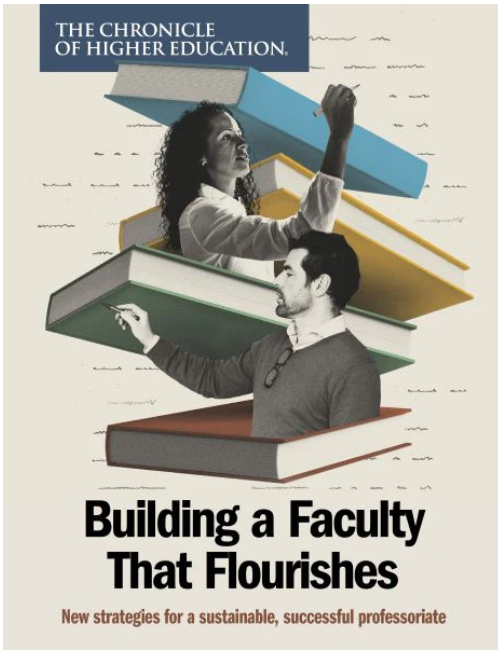
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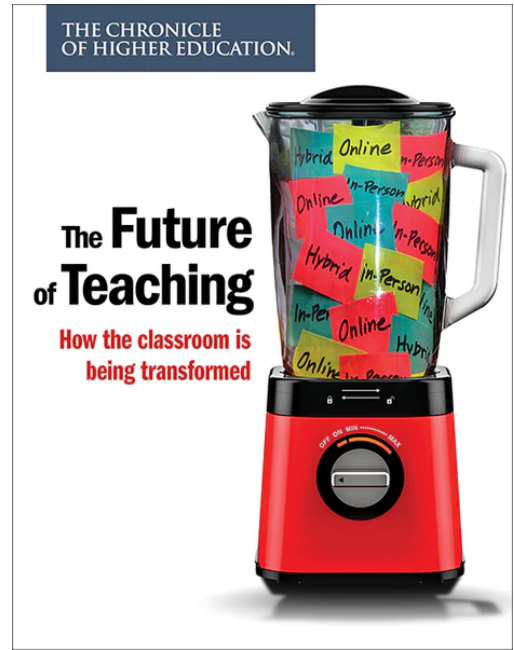
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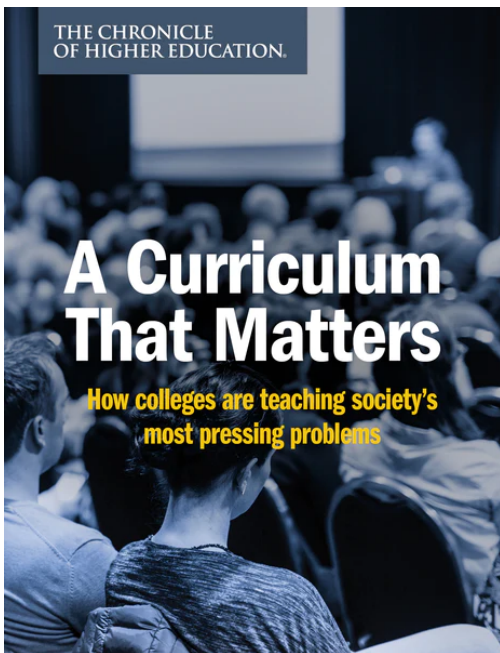
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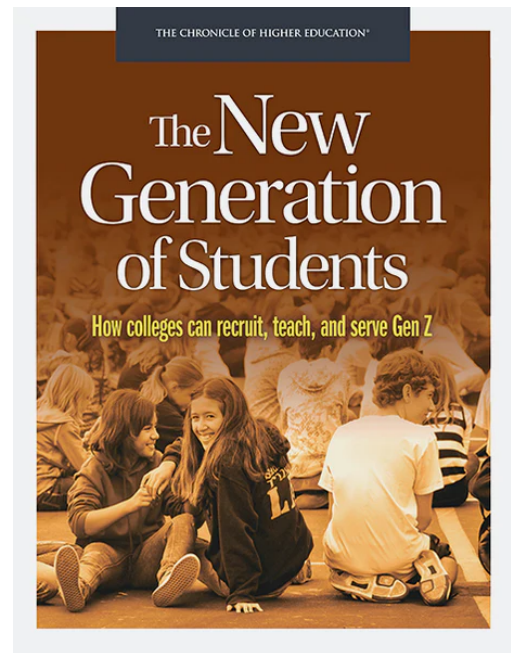
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