



ISSN: 1545-679X

# Information Systems Education Journal

Volume 4, Number 66

<http://isedj.org/4/66/>

August 30, 2006

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## Transition from Industry to Academia: Reflections of Three New Faculty Members

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**Recommended Citation:** Jensen, Rabe, Runde, and Wee (2006). Transition from Industry to Academia: Reflections of Three New Faculty Members. *Information Systems Education Journal*, 4 (66). <http://isedj.org/4/66/>. ISSN: 1545-679X. (Also appears in *The Proceedings of ISECON 2005*: §4122. ISSN: 1542-7382.)

This issue is on the Internet at <http://isedj.org/4/66/>

The **Information Systems Education Journal** (ISEDJ) is a peer-reviewed academic journal published by the Education Special Interest Group (EDSIG) of the Association of Information Technology Professionals (AITP, Chicago, Illinois). • ISSN: 1545-679X. • First issue: 8 Sep 2003. • Title: Information Systems Education Journal. Variants: IS Education Journal; ISEDJ. • Physical format: online. • Publishing frequency: irregular; as each article is approved, it is published immediately and constitutes a complete separate issue of the current volume. • Single issue price: free. • Subscription address: [subscribe@isedj.org](mailto:subscribe@isedj.org). • Subscription price: free. • Electronic access: <http://isedj.org/> • Contact person: Don Colton ([editor@isedj.org](mailto:editor@isedj.org))

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# Transition from Industry to Academia: Reflections of Three New Faculty Members

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## ABSTRACT

One of the key difficulties faced by many small baccalaureate colleges in recruiting for pre-professional positions is their ability to attract qualified and interested candidates. The competition for those candidates is intense because the demand for them exceeds the supply. Besides pursuing an academic career, qualified candidates are also enticed by career opportunities in the industry. Specifically, the difficulty in hiring permanent faculty affects a college's ability to maintain and enhance a management information systems program. The purpose of this paper is to share how a small, private liberal arts college recruited three alumni from the industry to be new faculty members to fill pre-professional positions over the last six years, the factors influencing the alumni's decision to accept the challenge, their reflections on their transition to academia and assessment of their decisions, and the rewards gained.

**Keywords:** pre-professional faculty, industry, academia, transition, small college, alumni

## 1. Introduction

Luther College is a small private liberal arts residential college located in a rural community serving 2,550 students. It offers a Bachelor of Arts degree and students can choose from a variety of majors. The Economics and Business department is one of 23 departments. It has 15 full-time faculty members responsible for four majors: Accounting, Economics, Management, and Management Information Systems (MIS). Over the last 6 years, recruiting qualified faculty members to fill

positions of colleagues who either retired or went on to other opportunities became more and more challenging. At times, one-year contracts were offered to adjunct faculty so that searches could be re-opened the following year. Specifically, the difficulty in hiring new faculty affected the department's ability to provide adequate support and enhance its MIS program. Furthermore, the recruiting and mentoring of MIS students were affected when the College could not find and hire permanent MIS faculty from the "traditional" pool of candidates.

It is a fact that the supply of doctoral candidates from business schools has not met the demand for new business faculty members. Many positions in the top business schools have not been filled and thus there is "an all-out bidding war for a limited supply of freshly minted and soon-to-be Ph.D's" (Mangan 2001). There is also competition from consulting companies that entice the new Ph.D's with higher compensation. There was a 19 percent drop in business doctoral students from 1994-2000 and average salaries jumped 34 percent from 1998-2002. The recently revised accreditation standards approved by members of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) will help schools that are "struggling to recruit enough faculty members with doctorates" because they no longer prescribe how many faculty members with doctorates a business school must have (Mangan 2003).

In terms of information systems (IS) doctorates, a recent survey shows that there has been "a gradual decline in the number of new IS doctorates since 1993 while the number of tenure-track faculty positions has grown dramatically." The data also shows "a large and growing lack of supply to meet current and future demand" (Freeman, Jarvenpaa, Wheeler 2000).

If the larger business schools are having difficulty hiring qualified faculty, it is a daunting task for small colleges to recruit new faculty members with appropriate qualifications. Since Luther College has strong ties with her alumni, the College decided that cultivating and hiring interested alumni to fill faculty positions is one feasible solution.

## **2. Educational Background of Candidates**

Julie, Steve, and Craig were typical Luther College alumni who kept in touch with their professors after graduation. When the "traditional" pool of candidates in various searches yielded few candidates, the decision was made to make potential alumni aware of the positions the Economics and Business department was looking to fill and encourage those interested and qualified to apply.

Craig graduated from Luther College in 1992 with majors in accounting and MIS, then earned his CPA and MBA, and came with 12 years of experience in audit, analysis, accounting, and finance from a large privately held multi-national firm. Julie graduated in 1995 with majors in CS and mathematics, then completed her Master in Software Systems, and came with four years of experience in a large corporation that provides legal, regulatory, and business information, and the technology tools to manage it. Steve graduated in 1997 with majors in management and MIS, pursued his master's degree, and came with six years of experience in leading major consulting projects in the information technology field. Julie joined Luther College in 1999 to teach MIS, Steve in 2003 also in MIS, and Craig in 2004 for accounting and management.

## **3. Why Pursue Teaching?**

Why would alumni be interested in uprooting their families to pursue teaching careers when they have established foundations in industry? Wanting to give something back to the college was the unanimous reason for Julie, Steve and Craig in deciding to make the transition. All three felt that they had received a quality education and they had come to appreciate what the community could offer them and their families. Other factors influencing their decisions included familiarity with the community and an interest in raising a family in a small town, an influential mentor during their undergraduate years who had made a similar transition, and interest in the flexibility offered by an academic career as compared to a career in the corporate world. Also contributing to their decisions was the fact that the corporate experience was not as fulfilling over time and they each had felt increased pressure and stress at work. They all felt that their "real world" experiences could help significantly in the learning process of Luther College students. Craig, Julie, and Steve also thrived on the challenge that teaching would present to them; they saw it as an opportunity to adapt and acquire new knowledge and skills.

## **4. Transition to Academia**

Even though their decisions were made after careful deliberation, and they tried to

prepare mentally to step into the academic world, Julie's, Steve's, and Craig's transition to academia would still be a challenging one. Julie, Steve, and Craig shared the following observations and reflections of their transition process for others who might be contemplating such a move from the industry to a small college. They understood that a few of the observations could also come from someone not from the industry but simply as a new faculty member.

### **Difficulties in Spouse's Transition**

Regardless of careful and realistic evaluation of the impact on both careers, not able to locate a comparable position in the new community would still be difficult for a spouse to deal with especially when he/she had to give up a quality job to facilitate the move. Over time, one spouse could feel less fulfilling career wise and that would affect the other spouse who was adjusting to the demand of being a new teacher and faculty member. It is an issue that both parties must address with candor and sensitivity.

### **Adjusting to Teaching**

The first semester can be grueling for first-time teachers given the class preparations, office hours, assignments and exams to develop and grade, departmental and faculty meetings, and other responsibilities. It was a stark contrast to working full-time with a group of peers in the industry. At times, one could take it personally when students performed poorly in class. Sometimes it was a struggle to recognize that you might not have been the typical student when you went to college; expecting students to do what you did when you were in college might not be realistic. Even though this might be true for all kinds of faculty members, it was still difficult to adjust one's expectations of students. "Teaching is really hard work!" as Craig pronounced recently.

### **Training to be Teachers**

Most entry-level corporate positions have some form of training plan, and as one's experience grows, one moves up, having been prepared (hopefully) for the next position. In teaching, you are just thrown in, sink or swim; you feel you are on your own and there is less classroom support than expected. You hope for a good mentor,

but there is not really much in the way of "training;" it is assumed that you can teach because you know the subject and have observed good teaching when you were a student. Lack of "training" in teaching can leave one "talking" too much during class time and always searching for "active learning" opportunities and thus feeling a lack of balance.

### **Mentoring of New Teachers**

For someone who enters the academic environment for the first time, current research affirms that the need for mentoring is real (Sorcinelli 1994; Fairbanks, Freedman, and Kahn 2000). Julie, Steve, and Craig all felt that they had received significant support in the form of a listening ear and ideas from department head and other departmental colleagues, especially those who have made similar transition from industry to academia. For example, past syllabi and materials were made available to them and the department head conducted classroom observations of each new faculty member and provided feedback face-to-face later on. Having a mentor with whom to discuss teaching and classroom issues reduces the feeling of having to reinvent the wheel through trial and error.

### **Compensation**

Be realistic because compensation is lower in academia than in the corporate world. As one of the three observed, it is "Twice the work for half the pay." It is important to consider what financial adjustments the family will have to make. However, the corporate world does not have the summer months to rejuvenate one's energy and soul and allow you to pursue new knowledge and skills. In order to supplement one's income, an option is for one to teach a summer course or secure a summer position in the industry.

### **Difference in Demands**

Although there is not the same pressure of large budgets and quick decisions, there is a demand of having daily deadlines. There is always something that has to be done for the day. You cannot go into a class unprepared, and you don't have the luxury of delegating anything if you feel you have too much on your plate. To a certain extent,

you are your own boss and the day is yours to manage and the consequences are also yours to bear. Furthermore, taking a vacation day during the semester to "re-group" is not an option.

### **To Be Always "On"**

While there are moments of quiet time at one's desk, when in the classroom or talking with students, a teacher needs to be the outgoing one, the engaging one, which is not in everybody's nature. In the corporate setting, there was always a problem to focus on and the need for social warm-up and engaging people in the material was lower; people were ready to engage the problem in most cases because it was their job and time was of the essence. In academia, relationship building is important because teaching is more than a job and you must take time to do it well with and for others. Collegiality seems to be the key word.

### **Levels of Interactions**

Teaching involves much interaction with students. On the other hand, you often feel you have less interaction with peers unless you are very intentional about doing so. Interactions with peers are common in the corporate environment because many work on the same project and in the same office space. Efforts must be made to connect with other colleagues because it is so easy to fill the day with teaching, research projects, and office hours; it is highly probable that one can be cloistered in one's office the entire day without interactions with other colleagues.

### **Size of School**

The small residential campus has a very "family" feel, but that "family" nature can also leave one with a feeling that every part of one's life is accessible to others. Students may call your home without your giving out the home number because they feel it is appropriate to do so given the close-knit environment. Students expect replies to their e-mail over the weekend, or want to meet evenings and weekends for various reasons, or invite you to activities including their music recitals, art exhibitions, sports events, and so on. And most of the time, their parents and other family members are

also there to support the students therefore your showing up is very much appreciated.

### **Service to the College**

Sometimes committees meet evenings or early mornings, with no question of whether that is fine with everyone. At times one can feel that there is no part of one's day which is sacred or one's own, in which one can absolutely say "no" to obligations from the College. In the corporate world, to schedule a 7a.m. meeting, for example, required consent of at least a few people, and for the most part evenings were out of the question. Of course one could work a number of nights and weekends on corporate projects, but usually wasn't required to do it on someone else's schedule, or to have to be in the building. And when people left work, they were gone unless there was an emergency that required their return.

### **Faculty Meetings**

They are vastly different than meetings in the corporate setting. Discussions feel endless at times in academic meetings. Ideals and ideas are usually the topic, and decisions in faculty meetings would sometimes be made by what felt like a committee of 150. People are allowed to have much more say in policy issues, but to a point that efficiency is all but gone. The pace of change feels glacial at times. While ideals are the focus, details of implementation are often overlooked. Decisions are made on principle first, with the assumption that the implementation can be worked out. It can be a struggle with meetings that lack decisiveness.

### **Speed to Decision**

One of the benefits of transitioning from a corporate setting to academia is that there are far fewer meetings in the academic environment. As one progresses to increasing levels of responsibility in one's corporate career, one's workday is increasingly spent in meetings. While not always productive, corporate meetings are characterized by decisions, action plans, and assignments. In other words, those meetings ultimately resulted in some action. In stark contrast to this, academic meetings seem to be characterized by discussion and then more discussion. Decisions are few and

far between as discussion fills the majority of the meeting time. In the corporate setting, discussion of ideals is rare as speed is of the essence; decisions are made with imperfect information by necessity, and action *must* be taken. In academia, the faculty will vote only after exhaustive discussions and amendments of all magnitude addressed adequately.

### **Thinkers versus Doers**

Early in the corporate career, individuals are generally rewarded for being "doers." Performance evaluations are filled with discussions of the employee's level of productivity and ability to work with the team. As a result of this culture of action, employees hone their skills in order to get the job done and be considered for promotion to leadership position. As careers progress and responsibilities increase, leaders are increasingly asked to become "thinkers" because they have already proven to be effective "doers"; otherwise they would not have advanced to this position of leadership. So, the typical corporate environment is a collection of doers with a small group of doer/thinkers in leadership roles. The academic environment in contrast may strike outsiders as a collection of thinkers.

### **Technology Support**

The level of technology available to support academic work is so different from corporate work. To someone working in a technology field, one could be astounded at the lack of adequate resources for technology support and acquisition. To a certain extent, smaller colleges could be less aggressive in investing in new technology due to price consideration, lack of technical support, and not wanting to be the early adopters. This makes it more difficult to expose students to cutting edge technology. Telling and not showing make it difficult to convey the information and concepts to the students. And it is also difficult for faculty members to keep up-to-date with new developments. In order to request new technology, one must endure a process that can take considerable time to navigate and be prepared to be the resident expert after acquisition.

### **Theory and Practice**

The perception among students seems to be that effective professors are those who could discuss with authority not just theory but rather theory and its application. As such, one should work to identify opportunities in the classroom to relate one's own experiences of application in order to make the theory more tangible for the students. Simply by way of observation, it appears that students engage more effectively during discussion of application than theory. As one looks forward to a long career in teaching, how does one maintain contact with the industry to acquire new knowledge and skills to stay relevant?

### **Continuous Learning**

The great thing about coming from the industry is the experience you bring, but that experience grows obsolete after a while, and so one needs to keep going back to the field. While sabbatical is great for that, in the day-to-day, you can feel very removed from the hands-on practice of your craft. How does one maintain contact with the industry to acquire new knowledge and skills? The rate of change in the business world today is so fast that your relatively recent corporate experience may become quite stale very quickly. As a result of this concern, you could begin to network with potential corporate contacts to arrange for work experiences for your sabbatical even though that could be several years away. Julie, for example, spent a summer with IBM doing projects a few years ago. It rejuvenated her and stimulated her thinking about how her experience can be transferred to her classes. Spending a sabbatical break back in the corporate environment can make one a better teacher and could result in a higher level of student engagement in the learning process. When that happens, the sabbatical experience is a successful one.

### **Scholarship**

The culture of academia is so different because there is a bent toward research, which one who came from the industry can find difficult adjusting to. Pursuing scholarly activities is important because it impacts tenure and promotion decisions, and supposedly is beneficial to one's teaching and students' learning. Someone from the

industry can feel out of place in an academic setting when scholarship issues are raised in meetings. There are conferences to attend and papers to submit for reviews. The whole process is so foreign and these scholarship expectations will take some work and resources to fulfill. Furthermore, what conferences are appropriate and are there sufficient funds to attend them? When other colleagues include you in their projects and/or show you how to proceed, it is a good way to learn.

### **Assessment for Advancement**

It might take some time for one to be at peace with the idea that you are evaluated for events like third-year review and tenure and promotion by people who may never have worked with you or seen you teach. In the corporate world, colleagues who know your work are responsible for your assessment. In academia, besides your department colleagues, there are faculty members outside your departments, the Dean, the president, and the Board of Regents who will be involved in your assessment decision. Some may likely know little or nothing about your field and yet they are making significant decisions about your employment and career. How much information do you share with your colleagues who will be writing the letters of support (hopefully) for your review file? And even though you may find student evaluations quite useful, it is a sobering realization that the comments of 18- and 20-year olds are part of your employment evaluation, which can make you wonder its appropriateness and validity at times.

### **5. The Reward**

The transition to academia certainly has not been easy for Julie, Steve, and Craig. However, there are signs that gains were made since they stepped into their new environment.

### **Connection with Students**

It is heart-warming when comments such as the following came from students: "Concept X has never made sense to me before ... I'm telling all my friends to take this course from you." and "Are you taking new advisees?" These intangibles may be difficult to measure but no less rewarding. It is very

enjoyable to teach students who like to learn and fun to share "This is what we do in the real world" with them. The students are great and it is a welcome challenge to teach new concepts and skills to them.

### **Bridging Industry and Academia**

All three new faculty members have good contacts in industry to visit with about industry needs and how curriculum may evolve to meet them. In return, those same conversations can also give their industry peers a sense of how academia works (not just from a student's perspective). Those contacts also mean opportunities for getting students into organizations for field trips, job shadowing, internships, and full-time positions, a win-win for both sides. Craig's experience indicates that a phone call to a contact regarding a promising student is far more likely to result in an employment opportunity than a letter of inquiry from the same student. This is especially true for internships that require very little commitment from potential employers; they simply need to be reminded of the potential values to their firm from hiring interns.

The new faculty members also recognize that they can lend their experience and expertise to the local business community in the form of "consultative" services. Through these engagements, they can provide a service to the local business community, provide experiential learning opportunities for their students, and identify potential internship and employment opportunities for those same students.

### **Mentoring of Students**

Certainly just having 'real world' examples is a huge help. But understanding the industry environment also helps in mentoring students through the non-technical aspects of internships and getting permanent positions, such as navigating through social and political situations at work. Having industry experience allows the faculty member a better sense of what students are experiencing when they go for an internship, for example, and enables the faculty member to help them better see the ties between theory and practice. Also the faculty member can help the students be more intentional about setting goals for what they want to get out of an internship

experience and how they might go about doing that. For example, how might the students find mentors and/or other resources in the workplace?

One's industry experience can influence one's teaching style. Julie's handling of her upper-level courses serves as an example. She tends to allow a lot of ambiguity in projects and the flow of the course because she wants her students to take some ownership in deciding what and how they should go about learning, just like they need to learn on their own in the work place. She also tends to teach a lot of the "text material" as examples (say in the Systems Analysis & Design course) of how to do modeling, and to encourage the students to think of data flow diagrams (DFD) and other tools simply as ways of thinking. Her goal is to give students a sense that there is not simply one right way to do things. She also tries to help them to develop habits of thinking that are useful in doing systems work, such as creating visual representations of systems, whether it is a formal DFD or just a sketch of the pieces, to help everyone see what components the system will need.

### **Benefits of Continuing Education**

It is the best way to keep current because it is extremely hard to keep current without doing it. And, for Julie, she finds that it simply energizes her teaching; she learns "cool stuff" and wants to share them with her students. Continuing education also helps her generate new ideas and new examples, and develop more credibility with students. For Craig, the experiences gained from returning to industry for consulting engagements during summer work or sabbaticals will allow him to bring the experience of current application to his discussions of theory in class. In his experience, student engagement during a credible discussion of recent methods of application is much higher than during a discussion of theory. These continuing education experiences will also generate changes to existing course syllabi by incorporating current methods of application, case studies, and other experiential learning opportunities that will enrich student engagement and learning. Furthermore, these experiences may also result in the development of entirely new courses for the curriculum. These new courses may

supplement and augment subjects covered in the existing curriculum and be offered as "special topics" courses on a periodic basis. They will allow students to explore in depth the recent industry experiences of their professor.

### **Life Style**

Academia affords significant autonomy to faculty members in setting the course for the day and the semester. There is great flexibility in scheduling because the hours devoted to work are not strictly 8a.m. to 5p.m. One can replicate a previous schedule or experiment with a new one. In day-to-day, the flexibility is good when you have to do something away from work during the day, say for your family, but not as good when you may find yourself giving up some weekend time to meet with students.

### **Sense of Belonging**

There is a much greater sense of loyalty to the place and commitment to doing the work well. Obviously, you do not work solely for the paycheck because that is not even comparable to what the industry was paying you before. The meaning you discover in the job is vastly greater than what you got from your corporate experience. Furthermore, a healthy town-gown relationship adds to one's sense of being a welcome member of the community.

### **Life-long Learning**

Great opportunity for personal growth can come from engaging in interdisciplinary work with other colleagues, leading study abroad classes to expose students to global issues, participating in campus projects that affect the strategic directions of the college, and so on. The opportunities to learn new things are available when one avails oneself. You gain a feeling that you are a perpetual student yourself and serve as a role model to the students under your care. It is better to walk the talk than just talk the talk.

### **The Whole Person**

In the corporate world, one can have faith in one's technical competency. But in teaching, the greatest challenges are personal – personal interaction, engaging students, and caring for the development of

the whole person in the students you work with. Those demands require you to be more focused on your own development as an entire person; what defines you in addition to your discipline-based knowledge? You begin to realize the tremendous responsibility and opportunity in shaping young minds and acknowledging and nurturing their individual gifts and aspirations.

### **Competition for Advancement**

Since everyone generally is recruited to fill an open position, there is not the same competition among peers for the promotion to another position, which happens in the corporate environment. The position is generally yours to keep or lose, based on your own work in fulfilling the teaching, research, and service requirements. This creates an environment where others feel a lesser need to compete with you and so are more willing to help you be successful. And as a department, your fellow colleagues are invested in your success because there has to be a strong team to provide the best education to the students and to help them progress to their life after college.

### **Faith**

Even though the faith element is not a standard for public schools or even some private institutions, it is rewarding to work in an environment that is committed to a "higher calling" and attempts to openly live that. It has nothing to do with proselytizing but rather to be able to have time to include contemplation of faith and vocation issues in your work life if you so desire. For some students approaching the end of their college career, it is comforting for them to find faculty members who are willing to listen to their anxieties when they struggle with "What am I going to do with my life?" question. And hopefully in that dialogue, the faculty member also understands himself/herself better.

## **6. Conclusion**

"Teaching is hard work!" as Craig proclaimed. He commented how glad he was to submit the last of his spring 2005 grades. Although the transition posed challenges along the way for all three new faculty members, it was made easier by

being honest with students about your background, about learning to teach, and being open to their help in that process. You do not need to feel like you have to be the expert. By helping students realize that you have limits, you can relieve some pressure and make everybody collaborate in the learning process.

It is definitely important to have a good mentor to talk to about basic classroom management issues, grading rubrics and policies, and how to interact professionally with students. Having materials such as notes, syllabi, and past assignments from others who taught the same or similar courses before is extremely beneficial. One also must have the courage to invite fellow colleagues to watch and critique one's performance in class so that there is a continual dialogue about improving teaching and learning.

The difficulty in hiring qualified candidates can affect an academic program, such as MIS, in terms of maintaining and enhancing the curriculum. Furthermore, not having a stable group of faculty members affects the recruiting and mentoring of interested students. Therefore, small colleges similar to Luther College must be creative in hiring and assembling a quality cadre of faculty members to support their curriculum. Having Craig, Julie, and Steve join Luther College after their stint in the industry helps the department to offer a better educational product and learning experience to our students.

We hope that their observations and reflections will benefit in some ways colleagues in similar situation and allow others who are contemplating such a transition a peek into potential challenges and experiences. As of this writing, Julie is working hard on her dissertation and looking forward to completing her doctoral study, Craig participated in an advising workshop this summer and took some new students under his care and is preparing to welcome his second year as a teacher, and Steve has decided to be a more global citizen by pursuing teaching opportunities in south-east Asia.

Finally, did Julie, Craig, and Steve get what they bargained for in leaving their corporate job for an academic career? To a certain extent they did.

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