



Summers in Tennessee

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How Did I End Up in Tennessee?

In 2004, I was enrolled as a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Michigan Department of Biological Chemistry. My research project had reached a catastrophic dead end and I wondered if my recently acquired Master's degree had any market value. Three weeks later, I was driving a U-Haul across the Midwest toward a one-year appointment in the chemistry department at BYU-Idaho.

While working as a temporary faculty member, I applied for a full-time position within the chemistry department. An important part of the interview process was addressing the fact that I lacked a terminal degree. I was aware of the program that some faculty members were pursuing in Idaho Falls, but I was interested in something more relevant to my area of expertise. The only chemistry-relevant program I could find that catered to a summer-only student population was a doctoral degree program through the chemistry department at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), at Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

I started taking courses at MTSU in the summer of 2006. Not knowing exactly what to expect, I left my wife home with two young daughters and a four-week old son to spend twelve weeks in an unfurnished apartment that smelled like mold and cigarette smoke. The landlord was kind enough to provide a stack of paper plates, a folding table, and drove me around in his pick-up truck until we found a recliner sitting by the curb that smelled slightly better than the apartment. I purchased a large quantity of cleaning supplies and air-fresheners that summer . . . and most summers since then, including this one.

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What Have I Learned about Being a Student?

The coursework at MTSU is fairly extensive for a PhD program. I was asked to take a full complement of chemistry courses as well as a core of educational theory and psychology courses. While much of the chemistry material was a review of things I had already been teaching, it was a fantastic opportunity to methodically refresh the core areas of my discipline. Having gained significant mastery of the material as an instructor, I felt like I was finally prepared with all of the prerequisite knowledge that teachers incorrectly expect their students to have. Since I was often separated from my family during my time as a student, I had no other distractions from my studies. I would return from class, review my notes, add in additional commentary after reading the textbook, and work through the practice problems in the textbook. I forgot how much I enjoyed the thrill of victory when my answer matched the answer in the back of the book. It was a fantastic reminder of why I chose to study chemistry.

Not all of the courses were enjoyable. While unpleasant, these courses have been more valuable in helping me

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identify areas where my own teaching could improve. One course was memorable for the obvious discomfort of the instructor with the course material. We, as students, dutifully purchased a voluminous textbook and then spent the majority of the course on the review chapters at the beginning of the text. As we lagged further and further behind the syllabus, I found that even the points associated with attendance weren't enough to convince me to suffer through another review of material we had covered the previous week. This experience still haunts me as I worry about the time that I spend reviewing in my courses and my own policies about attendance. If students are able to achieve and demonstrate mastery of my courses without attending class, I need to reconsider my assessments of course mastery, my use of class time, or both.

I was one of the last students admitted to MTSU's part-time, summer program. MTSU transitioned to a full-time program a few years after I started. This created a significant scheduling problem where many of the required courses for my degree were offered during times I was busy in Rexburg. During one summer, a course I had been waiting on for several years filled before I could enroll. I called the faculty member in charge of the course, explained my scheduling restrictions and asked to be added to the course. She told me that it would help if I sent her an email. She could then pass my email to her administrative supervisor and if they agreed to pay her for the extra enrollment, she would add me to the course. Asserting that employees should never be taken advantage of by their university, she explained that I should remember this lesson in case I was ever a faculty member. I remember this lesson well, but my perspective favors the needs of the student. While I have turned students away from my courses when enrollment reaches the breaking point, I have used fire code as my upper limit, not salary considerations. More importantly, I hope I have remembered to not involve students in any grievances I

might have with university policy. It reflects just as poorly on the faculty member as it does on the university to air these grievances in front of the students.

Impact on My Family

During the fall of 2011, I receive a 12-hour leave from BYU-Idaho and stayed in Tennessee with my family. My two older children enrolled in the local elementary school and we found a new ward family in Tennessee that welcomed us with open arms. This was a memorable experience for us. I was the gospel doctrine teacher, my wife served in the young women program, and we fed the full-time missionaries dinner on a regular basis. One of the elders had recently arrived from Samoa, and, in an effort to welcome him, my wife made pani popo (Samoan coconut rolls). These gooey drops of goodness have become a favorite breakfast item in the Sargeant household.

While I love Rexburg and the opportunity to associate with life-long members of the church, I found I loved being surrounded by recent converts in Tennessee. Teaching gospel doctrine was fascinating as various class members shared how their lives changed when they learned about the restored gospel and the principles discussed in the lessons. Another spiritual experience came late one night when my wife and I went to help clean the Nashville Temple. As we were the only volunteers, a 30 minute service opportunity stretched into the next morning. Those quiet hours cleaning the various rooms of the temple remain one of the most meaningful worship experiences I've had. I returned home, propped my eyelids open, and pounded out a research paper that no professor should ever have to read.

Spending Time in a Research Atmosphere

MTSU faculty members are expected to gain external funding, mentor graduate students, and produce published



research. This produces a research atmosphere that is missing at BYU-Idaho. Faculty at MTSU often discuss the research occurring within their research team during their courses. The department there holds regular seminars where visiting faculty present new research for critique. I don't know that I appreciated the excitement that accompanies presentation of new research before I began working at BYU-Idaho, but returning to that environment every summer is one of the highlights of my experience at MTSU.

It's humbling to be reminded how difficult it is to read and understand the peer-reviewed literature. My cognitive psychology course was especially memorable. Class discussions were used to draw tentative and often incorrect conclusions on the implications of pre-assigned research papers. When we seemed to reach a consensus, the professor would point out an important aspect we had misunderstood or identify weaknesses in the research design. Occasionally, when the discussion devolved into opinion-sharing, the professor would simply say, "that claim requires empirical evidence," and move the conversation to the next point. It took us a few weeks to recognize this was a gentle rebuke. It was inspiring to be in a class directed by someone who had such a wealth of understanding of the literature. This experience also haunts me as I consider my lack of familiarity with the literature

relevant to the courses I teach, but I hope I am better at avoiding claims when I lack a basis in "empirical evidence."

Is It Worth It?

I'm not entirely sure why I'm still working on my degree. I was hired with the understanding that I would finish, yet I wonder if I'm the only person who remembers that discussion. I can't think of a single instance where my lack of terminal degree has had a negative impact on my job satisfaction. At this point, I'm committed to finishing because I'm too proud to admit defeat. Perhaps, this is the reason most Ph.D.s are ultimately earned.

I hope my experiences have helped me be a better instructor. During the summer of 2010, I completed a student-teaching requirement by teaching organic chemistry at MTSU. The irony that I paid tuition to teach a course I regularly teach at BYU-Idaho was not lost on my teaching supervisor. The difference between my experiences as an instructor at MTSU and BYU-Idaho were fascinating. At MTSU, the students were very reluctant to ask or answer questions during class time. When I started calling them by name, several of them approached me after class and mentioned that I was the first professor that had ever learned their name. Students would come by the table in the library that I claimed as an

“office” and in addition to asking questions about course content, would discuss substance abuse, family instability, and other issues that I don’t encounter regularly at BYU-Idaho. What was meaningful about these interactions was the realization that learning chemistry may not be the most pressing issue facing the students that I see. I think there is a need for instructors to serve a very cautious role as mentors in the lives of the students beyond teaching them the course curriculum.

I also hope that my experiences have made me a better research mentor. Like many graduate programs, I have a committee that supervises my dissertation research. Meetings with the research committee members have been very helpful. The members seem genuinely interested in improving my project and have spent more time with me than I would have ever expected. When I’ve proposed poor ideas, they’ve immediately moved towards a discussion of improving the project design. The meetings serve to refine and improve my research. This contrasts with some of the mentorship experiences that I’ve provided where I simply, perhaps impishly, point out the deficiencies of a student project. It’s easy to take potshots at undergraduate research. Mentorship expertise involves helping the student improve their research project in a way that encourages and motivates. Seeing that occur from the perspective of a student has added significant value to my experiences in Tennessee.

Attending MTSU has helped me appreciate the value of research as a defining feature in the lives of university

faculty. I wouldn’t have left the University of Michigan if my career as a research scientist had seemed promising. When I came to BYU-Idaho, I saw it as an escape from my failure in the laboratory that would still allow me to focus on the aspects of chemistry that I enjoy. When I explained this vision of my career at BYU-Idaho during the hiring process, Glenn Embree, serving as the Dean of the College Physical Sciences and Engineering, commented that, “without research, our science becomes stale.” I think I finally understand his point.

Will It Ever End?

I’m not sure how to count my time as a graduate student at MTSU. Since I only attend during the summers, I like to say that I’m in my ninth semester of graduate school. My wife is quick to point out that it’s been nine “long” years. Her summer job as a single parent gives her the right to count the time. I’ve finished the course work, passed my preliminary examinations, collected a mountain of data, and am in the process of writing the research papers that will constitute my dissertation.

The program requires me to submit two manuscripts for peer reviewed publication. I’ve presented the research for one of these papers at conferences and written drafts of all three papers. Last year, I came home to Idaho, excited to finish those papers before Christmas of 2014. I didn’t even open the folder on my computer until March of 2015. Time seems to slip away during the academic year

in ways I never anticipate. Family, work, church, and college football all seem to conspire to prevent me from graduating. Before I know it, summer rolls around again, and I return to Tennessee to review my lack of progress with my committee. I keep waiting for someone, either at BYU-Idaho or MTSU, to pull me aside and put me out of my misery. Until then, I keep living a double life as student and a professor. I’d like to finish before Christmas of 2015. I’ve heard summers in Rexburg are the best two weeks of the year. ❀

