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ABSTRACT

This narrative tells the story of a nontraditional student who completed her education to become a college teacher when returning to school was quite unusual. Twenty years after high school graduation, the teacher received a bachelor's degree and began a 14-year career teaching mathematics and physical sciences in a public high school. In that time, she completed a Master's program in Natural Science Education, largely to climb the pay scale. She eventually enrolled in a doctoral program, which required 6 years more, and took a position as a visiting instructor as she was completing her Ph. D. The position subsequently was converted to a tenure track position. The author discusses the demands and rewards of her nontraditional education and eventual career path. She also outlines some of the differences in teaching at secondary and tertiary levels. (SLD)

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Running head: Back to School

## Back to School: Negotiating the Transition from Secondary to Tertiary Education

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1

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Trends in the civilian labor force over the next decade (2000-2010) are projected to include a greater percentage of women, a growing number of Hispanics, and a work force with a higher median age (Fullerton and Toossi, 2001). Trends also indicate that these are the very groups that are most likely to experience the greatest degree of occupational mobility (Sterrett, 1999; Carey, 1989). According to Bowden (1997) even members of traditionally stable career fields, like research scientists, are no longer immune to the transitions required in a labor market subject to a high degree of flux. In fact the traditional linear career ladder is now a totally inadequate metaphor for the career pathway experience of most workers. A decade ago, Guntz (1989) proposed the metaphor of a child's climbing frame to describe the complex pattern of vertical and horizontal transitions that characterize modern career histories. A more appropriate metaphor of the new millennium might add a trapeze to the gym set metaphor in order to account for the increasing incidence of workers who experience radical changes in their career field. According to Bolles (1979), the primary reason that adult learners continue their education is to facilitate work related transitions. These adult students need highly specified information regarding the nature of their anticipated transition. The following is an autobiographical case history of one such career change. It is in the hopes of this author that the experiences and insights related in this narrative will assist others who are considering, or even now pursuing a similar job transition.

### *The Transition from Secondary to Higher Education*

I was a non-traditional student, when they were not yet the norm. I received my Bachelor's of Science in May of 1988, twenty years after my high school graduation. I then began a fourteen year career of teaching math and physical sciences in a public high

school. It is somewhat amusing to me now that I almost did not take that first step toward a career in education. I was afraid that I was too old to go back to school, and that it was too late for me to begin a new career. Nevertheless, it is what I wanted to do. And, like so many other women, I found my courage in role models, and my emotional support at home (Kondrick, 2002). My husband, who already had a bachelor's degree, had gone to a local university to prepare for a career change himself. One of his classmates was an older woman who was completing her bachelor's and planning to apply for law school. I reasoned that, if it wasn't too late for her at 54, it surely wasn't too late for me at 34.

In the course of the next fourteen years, I completed a Master's program in Natural Science Education, largely in order to climb the pay scale. But, I have to admit, I was born to be a professional student. I would've taken those classes just for fun. Yet, I never entertained any serious intentions of pursuing a doctorate. After all, I wasn't getting any younger, and my family commitments were not getting any simpler. Nonetheless, after acquiring a Master's degree, my professional development opportunities often took the form of summer programs that included credit for graduate hours in physics education.

The more classes that I took, the more inclined I was to consider the next step. Then two pivotal events occurred. At a workshop one day, the female speaker introduced herself as a new college faculty member. She felt it incumbent to let us know that she had only recently acquired her doctorate, at the age of fifty. She made the point that the research indicated that three of us in that room needed to hear that testimony. I and one other attendant later acknowledged that she had spoken to us. Shortly afterwards, I participated in a summer workshop for physics teachers at a university 3 hours from my

home. One of the program evaluators was a member of the faculty in the College of Education. She invited me to apply for admission to the graduate program in Higher Education. She informed me that the fifteen hours of graduate credit that I had now accumulated past my Master's degree, was all that I could take into the program. It was time to make a decision: Was I going to pursue a terminal degree?

I scouted programs from coast to coast. Finally, I said "Yes" to a program nearer to home. I did take the MAT exam, and initiated the first stages of an application that fall. Then, I changed my mind to "No". I dropped the process in favor of spending more time with my spiritual mentor. She passed away that winter. I had no thought of regret for the application process that I had abandoned. Then, one spring day, I received a call from the university where I had initiated an application. They asked me to interview for the program. I was allowed me to complete the application process. To this day, I am sure that I won admittance to the program, not only on the strength of my MAT score and transcript, but equally because of my response to one interview question: "Why do you want to be accepted into this program?" I had replied that I wanted to open doors. And a door opened.

#### *Lessons Learned in Negotiating the Transition*

It took six more years to complete my doctorate in higher education. In mid – winter of 2002, I secured a position at a four year-liberal arts institution as a Visiting Instructor of Physical Science. That spring that I graduated with an Ed.D in Higher Education. Since then my position has been converted to a tenure track position. The thing I love the most about my new career is that doors continue to open on a regular basis. In fact so many doors are open at any given time that it is hard to know whether to

move up, down, or around on that the jungle gym of career opportunities. Negotiating the transition from secondary to tertiary education can nonetheless be fraught with perils.

*New culture, old baggage.* Negotiating the transition requires a new mindset and a new language. I recognized early in my new career that assimilation of old patterns in a new culture would mark me as an immigrant to the new land. I had to accommodate myself to the new culture. I had to redefine my relationship to students, to colleagues, and to administrators. The task would not be made any easier by the fact that for the next several years I would have former high school students in my college classes. Nor would it be easy to gain recognition as Dr. Kondrick, when I had begun my new career as Mrs. Kondrick.

Have you noticed that those who are not native to a culture give themselves away in subtle ways? I still find myself occasionally referring to my Section 2 class as my second hour class. I also had to resist the temptation to “report” to my Department head on my intended whereabouts when not in the office. The lessons learned are: Pay attention to the language and learn the norms of the culture.

*New culture, new rules.* Negotiating the transition requires an understanding of the rules of the new game. I recognized early in my new career I had to learn the rules of the new game. I studied the faculty handbook thoroughly, in order to be sure that I knew how my performance would be evaluated. And I set out to document a meticulous record of my endeavors and accomplishments. All this was set into a permanent record while I was yet a Visiting Instructor with a one semester contract.

It sometimes seemed like a futile exercise, keeping that log of activities. In fact, I was advised that in my position I did not have to keep an evaluation portfolio.

Nonetheless, I did. A year later, I was given the option of having my portfolio evaluated, although it was not required. I gladly accepted. After three semesters, a tenure track position was offered, with the option of credit for one year toward tenure. The evaluation of my portfolio gave me the confidence to accept the one-year credit. The lessons learned are: Plan to succeed and document a record of your successes.

*New economy, old assets.* Negotiating the transition requires a new currency, and a new calculus. I recognized early in my new career that I would have to re-invent myself as a new educator- researcher hybrid. I would have to find out how I was uniquely valuable in this new economy, and capitalize on those assets. I began by recognizing that my colleagues are by and large great teachers. They are what I would call naturals, never having been trained in the science of education, they are remarkably good educators. So here I am, an education professional among science professionals. And the two science education positions in the department are filled. My job is to teach physical science to non-science majors.

And there you have it, a recipe for a half-full glass of lemonade. I began to apply myself to bridging the gap for non-science students. I set out to help them make the connections between the world of their major interest and the world of physical science. It is a hard thing for a scientist to teach freshmen science majors; it is neigh impossible for them to relish detailed interaction with freshmen non-science majors. However, as a former secondary teacher, I had honed the skills and the patience that enabled me to help budding scientists in secondary education to develop a scientific mindset. Applying those skills and that patience to teaching in a general education science course in higher education has reaped its rewards. The lessons learned are: Focus on your strengths and

convert your assets.

*New networks, old mentors.* Negotiating the transition requires tapping into new professional resources and developing new relationships with old mentors. I recognized early in my new career that I would have to bloom in a new environment. I took advantage of every invitation to socialize, network, and otherwise get acquainted with all who could steer me as I negotiated the twists and turns in a new career path. I have also taken advantage of the many valuable opportunities to engage professionally with my former professors. I have especially valued these interactions with old mentors because they provide continuity in an otherwise strange land.

In addition, I have networked in particular with the women in my department and other departments in the university where I work. I find it is especially important when engaged in a traditionally gender-differentiated discipline, like physical science, to gain the perspective of women in the culture. Male colleagues may be sympathetic, but are often insensitive to the symptoms of gender bias. It helps to have a second opinion when conditions of bias are apparent. And it helps to know that I am not alone in experiencing such conditions of bias. The lessons learned are: Make new friends and keep old friends.

#### *To Leap or not to Leap*

A couple of my former secondary colleagues considered taking the leap to tertiary education, once they saw that I had landed on solid ground. They too were looking for a new challenge, an open door. They asked my advice on taking that leap. How difficult is the transition, and is it worth the cost? In conclusion, I will summarize my advice to anyone asking the same questions.



*Am I too old?* Never! I earned my doctorate at age 52. I will have at least fourteen years to work in my new career field before retirement. It was a great time to make the change. I was beginning to get stagnated where I was. If you stay in education more than five years, be sure to plan for a career change along the way. Whether you make a linear or a radical career change, get moving. Move in and out of a discipline area, or up and down the grade levels, or into a whole new career field. Don't stagnate.

*Is the pain worth the gain?* Maybe. If you have to invest a great deal of time or money into preparing for a career move, the gain may or may not be worth the cost. I enjoy schooling. And the extra hours were rewarded with pay increases that eventually returned the investment. However, the doctoral degree does involve more than taking classes. The research component will make or break you. Be warned that the designation of All but Dissertation can be a quagmire. When I completed my dissertation I moved it to the top of my life-list of "Things I would never have done, if I had known what it would take to do it." That list is also known as "Things I'm glad I didn't know what it would take to do it, because I'm glad I did it." Financially, I traded the top of one pay scale for the bottom of another. But this is not always going to be the case. Make sure to investigate the financial prospects. Emotionally, it was a goal I had an internal drive to achieve for its own sake. In some respects, having my doctorate is its own reward.

*How is life as an educator different at the tertiary level?* Vitality. For me there is little difference in the level of satisfaction in working with the students themselves. It is different, but not necessarily better. The biggest differences are the autonomy, the collegiality, and the multifaceted nature of the work. I love being treated as a true professional. I manage my own schedule, which is actually much fuller than it was

teaching high school. The forty-hour week is a dream of the past. But the flexibility suits my personality. The collegiality is also different. Talk among colleagues is more substantial than the steam-letting binges that secondary colleagues tend to relish.

However, the vital differences are in the multifaceted role of the higher education professional. Evaluation is based not only upon teaching, but also upon service and scholarship. This means that time and effort must be devoted to each of these facets of the position. It also means that opportunity, and resources are available to accomplish these tasks. Since I enjoy conducting research and participating in seminars, and workshops, these facets of the position add satisfaction to my career experience. However, many would prefer one hat that fits well to three hats that juggle well. Personally, I like relish the variety and the challenge of a multifaceted job-description.

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