Becoming a professor: Supporting K-12 educators' transition to higher education

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Abstract
This reflective autoethnographic case study examines four former K–12 educators' transition into full-time faculty roles at a Christian university. Using participant narratives, it explores shifts in professional identity, growth, and responsibilities. Participants reported feelings of isolation, impostor syndrome, and uncertainty, while mentoring and modeling supported their transition.

About the Authors

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Transitioning from K–12 teaching to higher education involves a substantial shift in roles, expectations, and professional identity. Despite strong pedagogical expertise, former K–12 teachers often face unfamiliar scholarly and institutional demands, particularly within education departments where they must adapt to academic culture while modeling practice for preservice teachers. This reflective autoethnographic case study examines four early-career faculty at a Christian university, highlighting the critical role of department-level mentoring, modeling, and transparent communication in supporting successful transitions.

Literature Review

Nature of Work

Although the work of K–12 teachers and professors of education may appear aligned, they involve distinct roles and expectations. The transition to higher education is often both exciting and stressful, as new faculty navigate competing demands such as course design, managing college students, understanding institutional norms, and initiating a research agenda (Fitzgerald et al., 2025; Page & Jenks, 2012). While former K–12 teachers bring strengths in instruction, assessment, and relationship building, aspects of academic life—particularly research expectations and institutional structures—may be less familiar (Fischweicher et al., 2015; Wilson-Hill & Ruffin, 2025). This transition requires navigating interpersonal, intrapersonal, and institutional challenges that differ from school settings (Eryılmaz & Dikilitaş, 2023), and is intensified in teacher education programs where faculty are expected to model exemplary teaching (Liang et al., 2024).

Many new faculty enter without prior socialization to core academic responsibilities such as research, service, and governance (Jimenez-Silva et al., 2019). Additionally, doctoral programs designed for working professionals often provide inconsistent preparation and mentorship, resulting in varied readiness for faculty roles (Alkathiri & Olson, 2019; Kumar, 2014). Together, these factors contribute to the complexity of understanding and adapting to the nature of work in higher education.

Identity

As new faculty transition into academia, they experience ongoing growth, tension, and uncertainty in developing their professional identities. Liang et al. (2024) identified four dimensions of teacher educator identity: research-oriented, teacher-oriented, expert-oriented, and learner-oriented, among which faculty often navigate with varying levels of confidence and tension. Those with K–12 backgrounds may feel as though they are starting over in the college classroom (Wood Varner, 2020), sometimes experiencing feelings of incompetence or impostor syndrome (Eryılmaz & Dikilitaş, 2023; Parkman, 2016; Yang et al., 2024).

A key tension lies in balancing a K–12 teaching identity, which supports credibility with preservice teachers, with a professorial identity valued in academia (Eryılmaz & Dikilitaş, 2023). Research-oriented identity is frequently identified as an area of challenge and development (Liang et al., 2024). To manage these competing expectations, some faculty develop "parallel identities" (Niklasson, 2019). Overall, identity development is multifaceted and marked by both struggle and fulfillment.

Departmental Support for New Faculty

Despite growing research on faculty transition, gaps remain in understanding departmental-level supports for former K–12 educators entering higher education. Existing literature largely focuses on institutional supports such as induction programs (Fitzgerald et al., 2025), faculty development workshops (Niklasson, 2019), and peer mentorship (Wilson-Hill & Ruffin, 2025).

Studies that address departmental practices emphasize the importance of clearly communicating expectations—from job postings through induction—and providing ongoing support such as faculty shadowing (Niklasson, 2019). Additionally, leadership from department chairs and opportunities for professional socialization have been shown to support identity development (Farwa et al., 2025). However, research remains limited in examining how departments can systematically scaffold the transition of K–12 educators into the professorial role.

Method

This study was designed as a qualitative autoethnographic case study. Arguing that the term case study

can be used to describe both the object of a study and the methodological approach, Creswell and Poth (2025) describe the qualitative methodology as the study of a phenomenon explored through one or more cases within a bounded system. The phenomenon explored in this inquiry—K-12 educators' transition to higher education—is specifically contextualized within the undergraduate Education Department at Messiah University in which four of the seven full-time faculty, all former K-12 teachers, are within their first four years of teaching in higher education. Since our interest primarily lies in the role of an education department's support of new teaching faculty as they transition from K-12 teaching to instructing pre-service teachers, we examined our department as one case, rather than studying each new faculty member in isolation of one another. This gave us the advantage of looking for themes and nuances across the data collected from all four participants.

Data Collection

The main data sources for this case study were autoethnographic narratives written by each of the four participants. Prior to generating their narratives, the researchers met to establish the study's research questions and determine the parameters for participants' reflections. The two main research questions guiding this study were: (a) *What are the initial expectations and concerns of educators coming from the K-12 world into higher education?* and (b) *What supports aid in the transition into higher education?* Participants then used these questions as the framework through which they reflected on their own experiences. While the resulting narratives made up the data to be coded, other secondary data sources were revisited, reflected upon, and referenced through participants' reflective process including institutional documents and protocols, departmental policies and protocols, course management systems, syllabi, and student course evaluations.

Researcher-Participant Profiles

As an autoethnographic case study in which the participants are also researchers/authors, critical reflexivity was a central component of both data collection and analysis (Preissle & deMarrais, 2015). Throughout the phases of the study, participants were encouraged to write not only about their objective experiences but also about the ways their biases, professional experiences, and positionality may have contributed to their experience of the phenomenon. Here, we provide a brief synopsis of some of the realities of positionality that arose through each participant's reflection process.

Bonnie taught for 26 years as a primary grade educator, with experience in kindergarten, first, and second grades. She had no prior teaching experience in higher education.

Christina taught for 15 years as an English Language Development teacher which included three years at the elementary level and 12 years in middle and high school. Prior to entering higher education full time, she taught as an adjunct at both the undergraduate and graduate levels for 7 years.

Jeanette taught for 22 years as an early childhood educator, 15 of which were dedicated to early childhood special education. She had no prior teaching experience in higher education.

Laurie was a middle and high school math teacher for 23 years. She had no prior teaching experience in higher education.

Qualitative Content Analysis

Our approach to coding and analyzing participants' autoethnographic narratives was based on Schreier's (2012) methods for Qualitative Content Analysis and was made up of four phases. The first phase of data analysis began by establishing a coding frame from our research questions. The resulting coding frame was made up of four dimensions: (1) Supports that Positively Aided the Transition, (2) Barriers that Inhibited the Transition, (3) Initial Expectations and Misconceptions, and (4) Initial Concerns. During the second phase, each researcher independently coded all four narratives using the established coding framework over a two-month period. During two calibration meetings, researchers reviewed areas of disagreement, discussed their interpretations of the coding categories, and refined their shared understanding of category definitions. Once independent coding was completed, the research team met to compare coding decisions and discuss areas of agreement and disagreement. Through structured discussions aimed at

establishing coding consistency, researchers examined representative excerpts, clarified their interpretations of category definitions, and worked toward a shared understanding of the coding framework. Agreement among coders was established through consensus, with discrepancies resolved through discussion until all researchers concurred on the most appropriate application of the codes. While there was initially some discrepancy among raters regarding the nuances differentiating barriers that inhibited the transition and initial concerns, this was resolved with the decision to code the data under both dimensions of the framework since some experiences may speak to both. This consensus-building process helped ensure consistent application of the coding framework across all narratives. In the final phase of data analysis, the research team met with the coded data to determine themes that emerged across the dimensions of our coding frame (Saldaña, 2013). These themes—Professional Identity, Professional Responsibilities, and Professional Growth—are presented in the Findings section below.

Findings

Professional Identity

Each contributor arrived at higher education with a well-developed pedagogical identity built over decades of K-12 practice. For Bonnie, pedagogical concerns emerged early as she worried that her instructional methodologies would be perceived as too "primary" for college students. Jeanette faced a more fundamental reorientation, moving from a context where individualization and differentiation were expected to a context where consistent standards for all students were expected. Christina dealt with shifts in accountability for professional expectations yet found that her work with high school students prepared her to engage preservice teachers. Laurie's experience offered a counterpoint as she found that skills in engaging students, providing clear instructions, and building relationships transferred readily from her middle school classroom to the university setting.

Contributors also navigated significant shifts in relational identities. The loss of an immediate, relational professional community was felt across multiple narratives. Jeanette described her former role in K-12 in terms of *in loco parentis* responsibility – she was not solely her students' teacher but was also a primary source of emotional security. In higher education, that dynamic shifted dramatically to more defined, adult-centered relationships that required Jeanette to intentionally reconstruct her relational identity. Bonnie described uncertainty about what collegial relationships would look like at the university level, having been accustomed to the closeness of elementary grade-level teams who interact daily, often eating lunch, supervising students, and planning together.

Another shift that participants described involved their vocational identity. Contributors viewed vocational identity as the 'why' behind what they did as teachers. All four moved from a commitment to teaching children and adolescents to a commitment to training the next generation of teachers. Jeanette noted that moving to a Christian university added another dimension, explicitly integrating faith in her teaching, something her public school context never permitted. This was viewed as an expansion of her professional identity.

Professional Growth

For individuals making a transition from K-12 education environments to higher education, the approach and expectation for professional growth differ. The goal for continuing one's education at the K-12 level is multifaceted, including maintaining one's professional certification, progressing through the pay scale, and remaining up to date in educational trends and practices. Through the participants' narratives, there is evidence that their experiences with district-led professional development provided guardrails and direction for how they experienced a collective approach to professional growth. Bonnie described the K-12 teacher professional focus as prioritizing the district and community alone, indicating that "teachers' involvement with educational research or educational trends is limited to what their district may provide during professional development." A district's uniform approach to professional development is further emphasized through the experience of the participants when in pursuit of their terminal degrees. While continuing education is required in the profession, the participants, who all pursued terminal degrees during their tenure as K-12 educators, indicated that the doctoral pathway set them apart from colleagues in a way that was not always positive. In Christina's example, she noted the

struggle to get permission to present her dissertation research at an internationally recognized educational conference, thus feeling like her individual growth was not "appreciated, celebrated, or emphasized by the district."

Across all four narratives, participants expressed a professional development disconnect between the two educational environments with a consistent focus on how scholarship in higher education, as a demonstration of one's professional growth, felt intimidating and drew out feelings of imposter syndrome. Three participants—Bonnie, Christina, and Jeanette—described feelings of isolation, which aligned with several comments expressing hesitation about the adequacy of university-level preparation for the transition into their professional roles. At the K-12 level, further education feels like growth for the collective; at the higher education level, scholarship feels like prestige for the individual. All participants described a shift from collective to individual responsibility for professional growth. In particular, the increased expectations for independently pursuing scholarship and disseminating research to broader audiences contributed to feelings of underpreparedness and professional inadequacy. Christina shared, "I did not feel equipped to put focus and emphasis on my own scholarship when I made the transition" and in a similar sentiment, Bonnie noted that she had a "limited understanding of [...] scholarship expectations" when starting her role in higher education.

Given that individual scholarship for the purpose of professional advancement felt pronounced for the participants in their transition to higher education, feelings, expectations, and perceptions of scholarship were significant topics within the participants' reflective narratives about the job transition. Participants agreed that university and seasoned faculty support around research and scholarship can potentially lessen one of the anxieties held in the transitions into higher education. New faculty could benefit from the modeling of scholarship structure and practice by seasoned faculty, as well as opportunities to partner in collaborative projects to learn alongside a mentor.

Professional Responsibilities

All four participants noted age differences in their vignettes. Laurie initially worried about teaching students up to 10 years older than she was used to but ultimately found it manageable. Christina felt that her experience teaching high school students prepared her for working with undergraduates. In contrast, Jeanette, with an early childhood background, did not anticipate how intimidating teaching adults would feel, and she experienced criticism early in the semester, which triggered self-doubt. Similarly, Bonnie, who had taught K-2, was concerned about her lack of experience with young adults and whether her planning and instructional methods would suit college students.

Christina described challenges adjusting to a new workflow as she transitioned from K-12 to a college schedule. Moving from a rigid contracted hourly day to one that afforded flexibility and autonomy was initially difficult. During her first semester, autonomy was both beneficial and challenging as she felt that she needed to prove her productivity. Likewise, Jeanette, who previously taught six hours of instruction daily using IEP data, had to adjust to planning without IEPs to guide her.

Two participants indicated that course resources were key supports during their transition. Laurie found access to a previous Canvas course invaluable. While she had experience grading objective assessments, she now needed to evaluate more subjective work, such as essays and presentations. Having course textbooks in advance was also helpful. Bonnie appreciated receiving syllabi and materials from the previous professor as she was accustomed to working with a set district curriculum.

All participants emphasized the importance of guidance and modeling from established faculty. Christina highlighted how faculty mentors supported her with time management, structuring workdays, planning for scholarship, and navigating annual reviews. Laurie noted the strong professional support and encouragement within the department. Jeanette emphasized the value of practical onboarding and mentoring and was grateful to begin alongside a colleague who had also transitioned from K-12. She noted that colleagues, faculty development staff, and students collectively impacted her experience. Bonnie was initially unsure about collegial relationships at the university level because she was familiar with the closeness of elementa-

ry grade-level teams who worked together on planning and sharing ideas.

Discussion

The process of recruiting, hiring, and retaining highly qualified teacher educators is a vital task for departments of education. This desire to support new faculty is often evident, yet can be negatively influenced by time restraints, resources, and a lack of awareness of what new faculty members need. Incoming faculty members may be reluctant to share their concerns as they desire to manage the appearance of a competent professor. Unspoken norms and expectations in higher education that are unfamiliar to educators coming from K-12 can undermine their sense of belonging. Tenured faculty may have forgotten their own transition to higher education and may not intuitively know how best to support their colleagues. These factors can contribute to further isolation and feelings of imposter syndrome. Departments can move past these misconceptions through a combination of proactively anticipating new faculty members' needs and tenured faculty members modeling vulnerability in how they transitioned into higher education to provide an environment where new faculty members can openly share their concerns.

While participants often described their experiences in personal terms, the findings suggest that many transition challenges were rooted in broader institutional structures rather than individual inadequacies. Participants moved from K-12 systems characterized by clearly defined schedules, prescribed curricula, and collective professional development into academic environments where expectations for scholarship, service, and faculty productivity were often less explicit. The uncertainty and self-doubt described by participants frequently reflected the need to navigate these institutional norms while simultaneously establishing themselves as teacher educators.

University leaders, starting with department chairs and including leaders across campus, are vital to the success of new faculty. Their acknowledgement of the difficulties and joys in the transition from K-12 to higher education sets the tone for the rest of the department. The four participants in this study, while having diverse backgrounds, shared common themes. Providing a department-specific orientation that addresses these challenges may prove especially beneficial. This orientation may include informal times when tenured faculty members share their own transition to higher education stories. This has a double benefit of reminding tenured faculty of their own past transition tensions while helping incoming faculty members feel more comfortable expressing vulnerability with their own experiences. Additionally, asking tenured faculty to share their own scholarship journeys and how they now conceptualize research may prove helpful. Inviting new faculty members to co-present or co-author upcoming articles can strengthen the ties across the department.

The findings further suggest that successful transition is influenced not only by individual effort but also by departmental structures and institutional supports. Access to mentoring, onboarding practices, shared course resources, collaborative scholarship opportunities, and transparent communication of expectations helped participants navigate unfamiliar aspects of academic life. These supports made implicit expectations more visible and provided practical pathways into the faculty role.

Our department's collaborative effort for this article provided our newer faculty with intentional, guided practice alongside seasoned faculty. With the regular check-ins for the collective task, we provided support and connection for scholarship and collegial relationships, positively contributing to the health and success of our department. Taken together, these findings suggest that institutions can reduce feelings of isolation and uncertainty by developing structures that intentionally support faculty socialization, mentorship, and professional learning during the transition from K-12 education to higher education.

Limitations

This study is limited by its context and design. Drawing on autoethnographic reflections from four faculty members within a single Education Department at one Christian university, the findings are not generalizable beyond this setting. The narratives reflect participants' subjective experiences, and although reflexivity was used to mitigate bias, self-report necessarily involves selective recall. Participants represented dif-

ferent stages of transition, ranging from one semester to three years. As a result, those further removed from their initial transition may have reconstructed or omitted details of earlier experiences, while those more recently transitioned may have recalled events with greater immediacy. Although these differences enriched the analysis by providing perspectives across stages of adjustment, they may also have influenced the consistency and depth of participants' recollections. Additionally, the study includes only faculty perspectives and excludes insights from administrators, mentors, or students.

Finally, the faith-based institutional context may have shaped both perceived challenges and supports therefore requiring particular consideration when interpreting the findings. Participants were situated within a small undergraduate Education Department at a private Christian university characterized by close collegial relationships, shared disciplinary backgrounds, and a mission-driven culture. These features may have influenced both the challenges participants encountered and the supports they perceived as valuable. For example, the department's collaborative culture, accessibility of senior faculty, and opportunities for informal mentoring may not be present in larger universities, research-intensive institutions, community colleges, or departments with different organizational structures. Likewise, the integration of faith and vocation described by some participants may not be relevant to faculty transitions in secular settings. As a result, the findings should be understood as contextually situated rather than broadly representative of all K-12 educators transitioning into higher education.

Future Considerations

Future research across diverse institutional types and using multiple data sources would help determine which transition experiences and support structures are transferable across contexts, and which are unique to particular settings. Such research would deepen understanding of the K–12 to higher education transition. In small departments, professors might be the only faculty member in a particular field. Assisting new faculty members to find discipline-specific networks might also prove useful. Organizations such as the American Educational Research Association, Association of Teacher Educators, Pennsylvania Association of Colleges and Teacher Educators, Higher Education Consortium for Special Education, and The Association of Mathematics Teacher Educators provide avenues for mentorship that are discipline-specific and can allow for advice and mentorship outside the department. While supports for new faculty may vary according to the department's specifics, the universal intent should focus on assisting the transition and investing in the individual.

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