

Independent School Careers Panel
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Panelists:

Kristen Wong - Mathematics Teacher, Germantown Friends School

Anthony Sgro - Assistant Headmaster and Dean of Students, Woodberry Forest School

Shelley Baum-Brunner - Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Notre Dame Academy

Grant Calder - Chair of History Dept. and Director of College Counseling, Friends Central

Introductions:

Wong: I grew up in the public school system in Seattle. I originally applied to the Philadelphia School District, but the system moved too slowly. I saw a posting for Germantown Friends and decided to apply. I had heard about Friends schools having good values. Interview day was filled with meetings and teaching, and they offered me the job at the end of the day. For private schools, I found that I need to be flexible and have a sense of humor. The school is really free about teachers structuring their own classes. At GFS, the department does a screening for each subject. We look for people with expertise in the area, experience with students. The interview plays a big part in how you interact with the department.

Sgro: I went to an all-boys boarding school, all-boys college and then transferred to Architecture at Virginia Tech. I worked in politics for thirteen years, but then I found a fundraising job at Woodberry Forest School. After working there for 5 years, teaching, living in the dorms, I decided to become more involved in student life. I no longer teach, but I'm involved in all other aspects of student life. We are very flexible at Woodberry and give teachers a great deal of flexibility. Boarding school is a little bit different than going to a day school. We go to school from September 20th until May 20th, six days a week. If you're interested in something flexible but demanding, this is the job for you. We look for people who are interesting—interesting experiences, interesting places. We want to give the boys a diverse view. My advice is to register with major school placement groups who have fairs all over the nation. I would spend time figuring out what it is you really want to do.

Baum-Brunner: I started out with an undergraduate degree in English. I earned a Master's degree, gained some experience, and was hired at Akeba. After a few years, I was named director of curriculum and worked with the administrative side. With private schools, you get a breadth of experience. I was actually offered a public school teaching job, but I turned it down because I realized I would have more opportunities to grow and learn by working in a private school. I wanted creativity and flexibility in teaching. By the end of teaching at Akeba, my resume was built. I'm not teaching anymore, but I help with curriculum, observe teachers, and make administrative recommendations. My experiences opened the door for me. We look for someone with teaching experience who can bring a special area of interest to the school.

Calder: One of the advantages of boarding schools is the diversity offered in people from different places. What most people don't expect is that in some important ways, we are much more diverse than either of the public high schools. 25% of our kids get financial packages, and our financial aid budget was \$3million. I don't regret any of my choices. There is much to do at Friends Central. Independent schools are often much more diverse than people perceive. One big draw is that you get to do certain things without having a particular credential.

Q: Could you speak a little bit about elementary education?

Calder: The curriculum is flexible. The cross-divisional and age-mixing among the different grades is great. Friends Central has managed to hire male teachers, which is something I never saw when I was younger. The environment is amazing. In each class we have two fulltime teachers with 15-16 kids.

Sgro: There's a diversity in each school. In K-8 schools, there is a huge diversity. If you're interested in teaching in the lower levels (K-5), look in many different schools. Look for schools with an appealing culture.

Baum-Brunner: Even working at K-12, there is a head for lower, middle, and upper schools. There is a different school environment for each set of grades. Within one school, there are different schools.

Wong: I've heard the lower schools are doing really great stuff, such as Smartboards and teleconferencing with schools in other countries. Getting an assistant job is great for getting your foot in the door as a part time.

Q: Anything for social workers?

Baum-Brunner: Counseling would be your best bet.

Calder: School psychologists.

Sgro: We have a full-time staff for counseling. They do need to be licensed.

Q: How would you compare teaching at college level with teaching at independent schools?

Baum-Brunner: I actually found the students in high school were working at a higher level than the college level students. However, in high school, you might have to address behavioral issues.

Sgro: I prefer teaching in high schools. The interaction with each student is very rewarding.

Q: With independent schools, what helps a school to commit to a teacher? What are the day to day obligations in the classroom of a day school?

Baum-Brunner: The commitment comes pretty early. What the parents think really does matter and if there's nothing but parent complaints, the school will let you go. Teaching five classes a day is very demanding.

Calder: We have one-year contracts. The first year is probationary. Once you've established the fact that you are reliable, you have tenure. There is a tremendous amount of support since the school invests many resources in a teacher. It is acceptable for young people to go back to grad school.

Wong: We have a three-year probationary period with one-year contracts. All major teachers teach 16 classes a week. The day quickly fills up with other events: attending core meetings, meeting with students who need help, extra involvement. It's more of whatever people choose to do.

Q: What about religion?

Baum-Brunner: It really is fine being Jewish at an all-girls Catholic school. As long as you are respectful of their religion, they will be respectful of yours.

Calder: Quaker schools are mostly non-Quaker. They are not at all imposing about their religion.

Q: What do you look for in a college counselor?

Calder: If you're a young person, the best route is to have a few years of experience working at a college level. You can work into the field. I've had people who didn't have college counseling experience, but they had faculty advising and are good with the kids. We're happy to train people to do it.

Sgro: The people who are the most successful are the people that understand the kids. Those that can figure out what each kid is like and what school would be a good fit are the ones that will be best. There are other full-time non-teaching positions such as counseling, administrative, development.

Wong: GFS does not have many full-time positions. If you're already teaching, it's easier to find out more about becoming a college counselor.

Q: What is the hiring process like for full-time positions that are not teaching?

Sgro: If you like a school, apply.

(Career Services comment: If you know where you want to be geographically, find all the schools in the area and apply directly to each school.)

Q: What do you do in the summer?

Calder: I do consulting which adds a nice addition to my income (\$60,000). We have big summer programs on campus that offer employment to faculty during the summer. We have summer study grants that help with Master's degrees. We also offer a sabbatical which is a half-year addition to the summer break.

Baum-Brunner: I try to take a trip when I can.

Wong: I try to do something school-related. Last summer I went to Japan and studied their school system through the Japan Fulbright Scholarship.

Sgro: I'll either travel or go to a second house. If you're a new faculty member without a Master's degree, it is expected that you to get a Master's degree in the summer, which is paid for with room and board for families. Faculty incentive grants give \$10,000 to study whatever you want.

Q: What is your view on certification?

Baum-Brunner: It has not been necessary, but I see it as a plus. However, teaching experience counts more than a certification.

Sgro: We look for interesting teachers with more experience rather than certification.

Wong: Certification in the math department has been a plus. There's new stuff about teaching, so certification is great.