

CORE COMPETENCY 4: Understanding the University Context**Interpretation/Reflection**

At first thought, I did not anticipate this competency to be one of the most important core competencies to consider developing while completing Michigan State University's Certification in College Teaching Program. I learned, however, that understanding the university context of the institution in which a person teaches, or the institution in which a person hopes to teach, is crucial in defining unique teaching goals and objectives. I imagine the university context is different among all institutions, and taking the time to identify and understand the context in which a person works will help one determine where they can be most impactful as a developing educator.

I participated in a workshop about understanding the university context as part of the Certification in College Teaching Institute. In the workshop, workshop leaders highlighted a number of institutions as a way of showcasing the range of institutions (and their differing characteristics) that offer employment opportunities for developing educators. Before this exercise, I had not taken much time to consider the "type" of institution I might want to join someday. Since I have completed my undergraduate and graduate work at public, research universities, I expected that type of university is where I could see myself beginning my journey as a developing educator. However, as I learned about other institutions (e.g., liberal arts colleges and community colleges), I realized that what I love about educating others—connecting with and developing relationships, empowering and inspiring my students by example, and discovering passions for solving real-world problems with my students—might be more feasibly accomplished at smaller institutions. As I think about what I value most regarding education and what I want for my own classroom someday, I may ultimately find that working at an institution with smaller classes and fewer students would allow me to build the relationships I have always hoped to have in my career and life. This workshop exercise caused me to reflect more critically about what I value and what institution I should target as I search for employment. Through this reflection, I hope to find an option that enables me to positively impact and serve my students (and be happy myself!).

As part of the workshop, I also learned that a diverse portfolio, in terms of outreach, service, education, research, and professional development, is an important component of a person's package as he or she seeks opportunities to teach at the collegiate level. I find that a lot of graduate students (and their advisors, too) focus solely on research-related accomplishments (e.g., frequency of publishing) during their time in graduate school. Though the importance of conducting research and publishing that research cannot be stressed enough, I am not confident the mastery of these two things alone equates to the ability of students to lead successful professional (educational) careers. I believe the experiences—academic and professional, but also personal—a person is fortunate to have provide essential life lessons and opportunities to build leadership skills that research cannot always provide. Thus, I am pleased to see many institutions encourage (or really, require) their faculty members to arrange and

dedicate a percentage of their time to research plus teaching plus outreach efforts. This shows me that institutions and their staff care enough about the kind of students (and perhaps future faculty) they are producing—individuals who are not only well-trained experts but well-rounded people with their own diverse experiences and values.

Part of understanding the university context is being aware of the types of struggles or hurdles a person might encounter as an employee of a university or other institution. I witnessed the struggles many women face in the STEM fields during a Michigan State University CareerSuccess workshop entitled, “What Works for Women at Work: Successful Strategies for Women in STEM.” For instance, the workshop presenter discussed her latest book, and she presented some tools and tips to help women, specifically, find success in the workplace (under the assumption that women are hindered in some way by their own personality and behaviors, perhaps). This workshop and the resulting discussion left me feeling incredibly uncomfortable. As the workshop went on, I heard from a number of women who complained about their own personal encounters with discrimination and sexism in the workplace. I was initially surprised to hear from so many women; I have not once felt discriminated against because of my gender, ESPECIALLY in the workplace. Perhaps I am one of the lucky ones. But, truthfully, I think this circumstance might have more to do with the fact that, because I recognize that discrimination and sexism do exist (this is a reality), I strive to be assertive, bold, and confident in my day-to-day interactions with other educators, staff, and administrators. This approach may not feel right for everyone, but I think it has helped me navigate through some situations that would have otherwise been more difficult had I approached them more timidly. Regardless, this workshop made me think; it made me realize that people in the workplace may be struggling with all sorts of things and that, even though I might not agree with or understand what they are, I should be more perceptive of, and empathetic towards, others’ feelings.

Not one university context appears to be the same. And neither is each educator—nor student, for that matter. I think these differences are what make universities and other institutions special, and I believe that we, as educators-in-training, are blessed to have options to consider as we make choices about where we can be most impactful to our students’ learning.