An Unexpected Calling: From Practitioner to Educator

Kimberly K. Folkers

My higher education journey—an unexpected turn

It seems especially appropriate to reflect on my career in higher education in my 25th year of teaching. I came to the field not in the logical or sequential way that many students assume will be the path of their own professional lives. Rather, my entry into higher education was unexpected and out of necessity. Interestingly, all 25 years of my life in higher education have been spent at one institution—a small, residential liberal arts college in northeast Iowa that has provided a place for me not only to teach, but also to pursue other passions that are an important part of who I am. As I look back from this vantage point, what seems very clear is that, however unexpected it seemed at the time, that need for a job led me to what I now believe was my calling into teaching and the world of higher education.

So, how did this unexpected journey begin? I had moved to a new area and was looking for a job after several years in the financial services industry. Additionally, I had just finished graduate school while working full-time, which became one of several serendipitous aspects in how things played out.

My decision to pursue graduate school had been motivated more by personal interest than professional necessity. My boss at the time was puzzled by my interest in getting a master’s degree in general, and was even more at a loss as to why I would pursue the particular program that I chose. Thankfully, in spite of his skepticism about the program’s applicability to my career in the insurance industry, he agreed to pay my tuition.
The program was brand new and modeled on another program I had long admired many states away. It allowed me to combine a Master’s in International Management (MIM) with language study. Having studied French throughout high school and college, and having participated in a study abroad program in France as an undergraduate, the new MIM program felt like a perfect choice. It was a true extension of the focus I had pieced together as an undergraduate—business and French.

Back to my unexpected calling. My original application to the college that would become my professional home was for a development position. After that position was filled internally, my resume was shared with the Business Administration and Economics department chair. She was working in late May to fill a tenure-track position for the coming fall semester. The position was open after their successful candidate from a spring search decided to take a position elsewhere. Initially, I sidestepped her contact, not seeing a fit, but she was persistent. Eventually we had a conversation during which she asked if I had ever considered teaching at the college level. I told her honestly that it had never occurred to me. I had done quite a bit of training in my professional work, but full-time teaching in higher education had never been something I had thought about. Imagine my surprise when she shared with me that the vacant assistant professor position was somewhat unique for their department. They needed someone who could teach a variety of marketing and business courses, including International Marketing and Multinational Management. They also wanted someone who had a passion for cross-cultural dimensions of business and someone who would be supportive of their International Business concentration, which required that students minor in a foreign language. It was hard not to believe that there was a bit of serendipity taking place.

During the interview process, a seasoned faculty member looked me in the eye and said, “You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into, do you?” How could that be? I’d worked hard in the insurance industry and finished graduate school while working full-time. How much harder could this be? Little did I understand the challenge I was about to undertake, not just that first year, but for many years to come. However, today, with the benefit of hindsight, what seems quite clear to me is that “what I got myself into” was, in fact, a tremendously compelling career where no two days in a row