
A degree short to teach

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After 26 years of work experience in the automotive industry and eight and a half years at Weber State University (WSU) in Utah working as an automotive instructor, the last thing Lynn Adams expected was a pink slip.

"I wasn't actually fired, they just called me in and told me that they wouldn't be renewing my contract next year," Adams said. "I was told it was because I don't have a bachelor's degree."

While his fellow tenured co-workers were studying in college classrooms, Adams was pursuing a hands-on education working as a Service Manager in the tire and automotive industries.

Adams was initially approached by WSU's Automotive Technology program and offered a position as an Instructor in 1998.

"They contacted me and asked me if I'd be interested in teaching and I really wasn't at the time, but they talked me into giving it a try," Adams said. "I began to see it as an opportunity to share my experience with young people to help them achieve their goals."

Adams said that the passion of 26 years of his adult life has translated nicely into the classroom, as he is able to draw on experience in the industry as well as what he has learned from text books to create his lesson plans.

"I learned long ago that to get what you want in life you have to help other people get what they want," Adams said. "That's what I liked about teaching. I was helping students get what they wanted in life."

Adams quickly grew to love the atmosphere of a university classroom filled with young, energetic students, a welcome change of pace from the high-pressure sales environment Adams was coming from in the automotive industry.

According to Adams, when he was hired as an instructor specialist at WSU on a one year renewable contract, he was told that he

would need to pursue a bachelor's degree, but he was never given a deadline.

"I can't say that I was given any warning that not having a degree would cause me to lose my job," Adams said. "It was never an issue that I didn't have a degree because I was an expert in my field."

Since he was hired, Adams has taken classes nearly every semester and is currently just 24 credit hours from receiving a bachelor's degree in automotive technology and a minor in English.

"I can't say that I am happy to go," Adams said. "They hired me knowing that I didn't have a degree and then they fire me because I don't."

Adams was informed that he would lose his teaching position by the Dean of WSU's Applied Science and Technology Department, Warren Hill.

"I asked why there was no warning that my contract wouldn't be renewed and he (Hill) didn't really reply. He just said in the department you have to have a degree," Adams said.

Hill was contacted by phone and e-mail but denied repeated requests for an interview saying that he doesn't comment on personnel issues.

John Kowalewski, Director of Media Relations for WSU, would speak on the record and said that the university is well within its rights to not renew Adams' contract.

"The automotive technology program is upgrading from a program to a department," Kowalewski said. "Adams is an instructor specialist and his contract isn't being renewed for programmatic reasons because the dynamics are changing within the department."

According to Kowalewski, changing from a program to a department will create greater visibility and influence how the Automotive Technology Department is viewed by potential students investigating enrollment in the program. Kowalewski also said that by becoming its own department the automotive technology program will no longer be overseen by the Applied Sciences

Department and will enjoy greater autonomy, meaning the department will oversee its own annual budget.

When asked what direct benefits the change will have for students, Kowalewski said, "One way that students benefit is easier access to partnerships with manufacturers and dealers given the department-level status. These partnerships may lead to internships and employment opportunities."

Under the appointment criteria for an "instructor specialist" in the PPM it states, "Competence in the profession, the ability to communicate training and subject matter to others and professional licensing (when appropriate) to perform or supervise in the particular field shall be considered requisite for appointment to this rank. A baccalaureate degree *may be required*" (italics added).

When read this section of the manual, Kowalewski said that when WSU's automotive program elected to become a department it became subject to stringent academic standards and additional requirements under the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU).

"A degree is required to meet new department guidelines to comply with academic standards and retain its accreditation," Kowalewski said. "They are governed by accreditation which they cannot fail to meet."

This is news to the Vice President of the NWCCU, Al Johnson.

"It's very unlikely that the commission would ever say that to an institution unless there was a specific violation," Johnson said.

NWCCU records indicate that WSU has been an accredited university since 1932. The NWCCU conducts a comprehensive review to reevaluate each university every ten years where they look at everything from the school's finances and the quality of the student services to the professional growth and qualifications of instructors.

According to Johnson, WSU underwent this process in the Fall of 2004 and had their accreditation reaffirmed.

Johnson also said that although WSU's automotive technology program has transitioned to a department, the NWCCU commission would never take away a university's accreditation because an instructor did not have a bachelor's degree.

"The commission has a reasonable expectation faculty members will have appropriate credentials, but that does not necessarily include a degree" Johnson said. "We don't reach in and tell the institution you must have this or you must have that."

Under the NWCCU's Faculty Selection Policy 4.A.8 it states: "Part-time and adjunct faculty are qualified by academic background, degree(s), and/or professional experience to carry out their teaching assignments and/or other prescribed duties and responsibilities in accord with the mission and goals of the institution."

Nowhere in WSU's policies and procedures manual or NWCCU's policy manual does it state that a degree is mandatory for an instructor specialist or that the degree must be in a field related to the department where one teaches.

Not only are the new department requirements stricter than those of the NWCCU accreditation body, the automotive industry itself doesn't hold their instructors to the same academic standards as WSU's automotive department.

The Lead Instructor for Toyota's T-TEN program at WSU, Ben Shekar, does have a bachelor's degree, but it is not in automotive technology; and refused to say what discipline he had studied when contacted for an interview.

Joseph Grundvig is another instructor specialist at WSU who has taught in the General Motors Training Center since 2004 without a bachelor's degree, while pursuing a degree in automotive technology at the university, like Adams. Mr. Grundvig did not respond to calls and e-mails requesting an interview, but according to Lora Kelley, WSU's Customer Service Assistant, Grundvig will continue teaching at WSU next year—despite the change from a program to a department—because he technically works for GM as an instructor in WSU's General Motor's Training Center and not for WSU.

In a survey taken of the 10 individuals currently employed within the Automotive Department, excluding Adams, two have degrees in

automotive engineering technology and one has a degree in electronic engineering technology.

These numbers do not surprise Adams.

"An awful lot of people work in a field other than what they have a degree in," Adams said. "A degree doesn't prove that you're a smart person."

As things currently stand, at the end of June Adams will be out of a job despite a proven track record as an effective instructor in WSU's Automotive Technology Department for eight-and-a-half years.

According to Adams, his department evaluations have been overwhelmingly positive and was told that he consistently receives the highest student evaluation reviews in the program.

Kowalewski was not privy to Mr. Adams' records and could not confirm or refute this claim, and Hill was unwilling to confirm or deny any personnel related matter.

John Kelly, Associate Professor and Program Manager of the Automotive Technology Program, said "I fully support the decision to not renew Mr. Adams' contract."

Lisa Burr, WSU's Program Coordinator and Customer Sales Technician, said that she feels that an automotive instructor should be required to have a degree to teach.

Adams said that he was actively pursuing a degree, balancing his day job as an instructor, and a family and feels that he wasn't treated fairly because his contract was terminated without warning.

"I supervised people for years before I started teaching, and I would always give them a chance to fix what they were doing wrong," Adams said. "After my review last year they said that I was doing a good job and to keep working towards my degree, I can't say that I saw this coming."

Hill notified Adams in March that his contract would not be renewed, giving Adams just three months to secure new employment on top of his teaching schedule - which continued through the first week of May.

When asked why Adams was not given a deadline to acquire a degree or lose his job, Kowalewski said that he was not in a position to comment on specifics.

In contrast to the tight-lipped WSU administration, tuition-paying current and former automotive students of Adams have a lot to say about the loss of their instructor.

"I thought that he was one of the better professors," said Jill Saunders, a junior in WSU's automotive department and former student of Adams. "I liked his teaching style. He was always really interested in his students, even outside of class he would do just about anything for any of his students."

Stephen Brown, a former student of Adams who works for DaimlerChrysler agrees.

"He was a good instructor. He knew the industry really well, especially the dealership portion of it because he had been a dealer for so long," said Brown. "He is the only professor I know that's been in dealerships and has been a service manager out there getting practical experience."

Although the fact that Adams does not have a bachelor's degree is a sticking point with Hill who elected not to renew Adams' contract, his students say that in the estimation of an educator, quality is not always synonymous with quantity.

"A degree is just a piece of paper. It doesn't tell what you know it just tells what you did for four years," Brown said. "I don't think not having a degree made him unqualified at all. I think he has more knowledge than a lot of other professors."

According to Brown, Adams will be difficult to replace.

"I don't know if you could ever find someone with the same experience that wants to come teach," Brown said. "Once someone's been out there in the field...he has the potential to make a lot more money if he is out there working in the industry at a dealership."

Saunders agreed that Adams' concern for his students' success set him apart as an instructor and overshadowed his lack of formal education in her estimation.

"I don't think that just because you have a degree it means that you are qualified to do anything, especially when you come from a technical background," Saunders said.

Saunders admits that her opinion is a little biased. Her father Merle Saunders is a nationally recognized High School teacher who teaches Auto Service and Technology classes at Vale High School in Oregon—without a degree.

"He can't get a job anywhere else because he doesn't have that little piece of paper," Saunders said." (See related story [Experience v. Education: What Makes a Good Teacher?](#))

In the automotive field, Adams doesn't agree that a college degree should be the most important criteria for determining who is eligible to teach.

"I'd have to say that in my opinion an educator should have education in the field along with experience in the field," Adams said. "I've never really been fond of guys who've been in school all their lives and have never performed any real work especially in a technical field. I can't imagine having an accounting professor that hadn't been an accountant."
