

## Notes on an Interview with Professor Michael Rogers

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Photo from RIT website: [https://www.rit.edu/academicaffairs/facultyscholarship/featured\\_faculty.php?year=2012&id=Rogers](https://www.rit.edu/academicaffairs/facultyscholarship/featured_faculty.php?year=2012&id=Rogers)

*Michael Rogers is a full professor in the School for American Crafts Glass Program at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). Professor Rogers received his Masters of Fine Arts in Sculpture at the University of Illinois in 1981. In 2012, Rogers received a Fulbright Grant to further his cross-disciplinary and collaborative work. His research has taken him to Japan, Scotland, Latvia, Finland, Sweden and China. I have had the honor of meeting Professor Rogers on several occasions. In addition to being a thoughtful and skilled maker, he is a humble, knowledgeable, and dedicated professor.*

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\*Text below is summarized statements from Professor Rogers. Direct quotes are in quotations.

Interview Date: 4/4/2016

**\*Could you talk to us about how you came to teach at RIT? What has been your career path thus far?**

After graduate school (MFA in sculpture), Rogers became a tech assistant at RISD. However, within a year the department went on strike. Due to this, he moved back to Chicago. There, he ran his own production studio for nine years and exhibited work. Through a past contact who referred him, Rogers was offered a job to teach glass at a university in Japan, which is 24 years ago at this point. This was his first official teaching job. Although he was only given 3 months, he decided this was an opportunity he could not pass up. Roger thought he would stay for about three years but ended up staying for eleven. During his first sabbatical in Japan he taught at Ohio state university. He was excited for an opportunity to teach in the US and to experience a diverse classroom environment. After a decade in Japan, Rogers realized he had a choice to make...did he want to stay in Japan for the rest of his life or move back to the US? He realized that if he waited to be tenured and over 50 that is would be hard to find a job in the states. Therefore, he began to research where he wanted to teach in the US. The only university he applied to was RIT. Amazingly, he was offered a position as associate professor. He accepted

the position and moved to NY. Early in his professorship he took on the role of Chair, which added much work on top of his designated class load. However, he saw taking the position on as a way of ‘paying his dues’, an obligation that is necessary at some point in a collegiate career. Three years into his professorship at RIT he was offered a Tenure position. Rogers has now taught for thirteen years and in looking to retire in four to six years.

**\*How do you balance Institutional duties with your duties to your students? Are they ever at odds?**

Rogers explained that there is an inherent responsibility to both ends. One must navigate by giving attention to what needs the most care at the time. In a way, it is akin to “putting out fires”. At the end of the day, teaching is community based and sacrifices must be made. We must do our best to balance our duties with practicality and logic.

**\*What is the most fulfilling parts of your career?**

While talking to Rogers about this question, he mentioned friendship repeatedly. The collegiate teaching world is extremely connected. Through this comes opportunities to build relationships with fellow artists, intellectuals, teachers and students. This comes about not just through teaching but through travel. For Rogers, this has led to many fascinating collaborations and personal creative opportunities. Also, because personal research (studio work) is emphasized as part of the job, there is time built in for learning and thoughtful exploration. Rogers said being a professor changed his work in very positive ways. Teaching keeps him creative and inspired. Additionally, watching students grow and then move on to be successful artists and sometimes teachers themselves is immensely fulfilling. He said, “My most enduring work is what I pass on to my students”.

**\*What are the most frustrating elements?**

As with any job, there are positive and negative aspects. However, a positive attitude and a determination to make the best of any situation is key to successfully navigating roadblocks and difficulties. Universities are like organisms and must change with the times. As professors, we can play a role in creating not only a reflective teaching practice but a reflective attitude at our institutions. One must realize that not everything can be accomplished, but you can make positive change with will and tenacity. Rogers’s main complaint was how high tuition has become for students and he believes that this is something that MUST change for the health of our educational system. He admitted he couldn’t have attended RIT himself if the tuition was as high then as it is now.

**\*What does a ‘normal’ term look like for you? (Such as: how many classes do you teach, how is your time divided?)**

Three classes and committee work. After those responsibilities comes personal research and studio practice, which are vital, and expected, from a professor.

**\*What advice do you have for graduate students who are interested in teaching on the collegiate level? (For example: working within an institution, teaching methods and strategies, what to look for when seeking employment, how to be competitive to employers)**

**First teaching job:**

BE VERSITAL: be able to teach a variety of subjects. This is especially important for those that are right out of an MFA program and looking for their first teaching position.

Tech positions are, often, a “kiss of death” for those who ultimately want to teach. If you stay too long as a tech you will be pigeon holed and may never be able to get a position teaching.

Take a job! Don't be too picky about location. It is better to take a position in a small department in the middle of the country where you are teaching in your field (printmaking vs. foundations) than to live in a large coastal city and be forced to eternal adjunct positions or teaching in a field you are not interested in as a lifetime goal. He said, “Moving straight to NYC to try and begin a teaching career is like jumping into the ocean”. Rogers believes it is easier to move toward your dream area of the country (or the world) after gaining experience and making a reputation for yourself. Also, taking a position with a small and/or struggling department can be an opportunity to shine. See it as a chance to show how you can better an institution.

Adjunct positions can be good or bad for your career, depending on the situation. Typically, these positions can be a lot of effort with very little pay. However, it can be a great foot in the door and way to gain experience. For instance, if RISD offered an adjunct position to a student post MFA, that students should consider saying yes. However, he has seen teachers fall into an endless loop of seeking prestigious institution association through adjunct work. Years and years pass and opportunities to get onto a tenure track somewhere else pass them by.

Be kind, positive and be willing to really work. Professors are looking for good colleagues. Usually there aren't a lot of teachers in a department. Negativity can act like a disease and can bring down the entire department.

**Toward Tenure:**

Professors are evaluated in three categories: Community work, Teaching, and Scholarship. However, if the scholarship isn't strong, you will most likely be passed up for Tenure. Institutions are looking for teachers who are also actively making and showing. This includes, more and more, international exhibitions and recognition. Without a strong practice and continued personal research you will never achieve tenure.

Rogers also recommends doing committee work. At the end of the day, universities are community based. They want to see that you take that role seriously and that you are dedicated to being a positive contributor.

**\*Are there any trends you are seeing in academia that you would like to comment on?**

Many institutions are distancing themselves from the term “craft”. Titles are being changed constantly to reflect this move. Rogers doesn’t necessarily see this as a negative. He said, “Craft is the grammar of what we do. It’s almost a given. So, understand the grammar and move on to the bigger questions.”

Rogers ended the conversation by saying that there is no better gig in the world for an artist than to be a teacher.