

Postdoc Academic Chat #7

Teaching at a Community College

Tuesday, April 12, 2016

Readings

#1 Career Opportunities for Ph.D.s and Postdocs at Community Colleges

#2 Becoming a Community College Professor

#3 Teaching at a Community College: Some Personal Observations

#1 Career Opportunities for Ph.D.s and Postdocs at Community Colleges

Richard Reis

Traditionally Ph.D.s and postdocs have not considered community college positions because of the perceived lower prestige, little or no research opportunities, higher teaching commitments, less selective students, and so on. However, for some Ph.D.s and postdocs, teaching at a community college may just be the right ticket to a satisfying and rewarding faculty career. We will look at why this might be so in a minute but first let's consider some relevant facts and statistics.

In the United States, 22 percent of all higher education faculty and 21 percent of all higher education students are at two-year community colleges. There are 1,123 such institutions, including branch campuses. Most faculty at community colleges have master's degrees; however, 13 percent have Ph.D.s and that percentage is increasing. [1]. Between 1990 and 2010 student enrollment in community colleges increased by 65 percent and degrees and certificates awarded increased by 127 percent. [2]. Twenty eight percent of faculty are in the humanities, 25% in the social sciences and education, 22% in the natural sciences and engineering, 10% in business/law/communications, 7% in health sciences, and 8% in other fields. [3].

As of Fall 2013, there were 12.4 million community college students. They represent 46% of all undergraduate and 41% of first time freshman. 61% of all Native American college students are enrolled in community colleges, as are 57% of all Hispanic students, 52% of African American students and 43% of Asian and Pacific Islander students. [4]

While faculty increases have not kept up with enrollment increases (due to budget constraints that many new community college positions are part-time) total faculty at

two-year institutions is projected to increase significantly in the next 10 years.

The traditional mission of community colleges has been to offer lower division courses leading to an associate in arts (AA) or associate in science (AS) degree followed by transfer to a four-year institution, and to prepare for vocational careers that are not part of a 4-year institution. Offering lower division courses is still the primary role of such colleges, and indeed, as costs at four-year institutions continue to rise significantly, more students who could qualify for admissions to such places right out of high school are choosing to live at home and attend a much less expensive two-year institution nearby. Community colleges also offer training and certificates in occupational fields such as nursing, electronics, office administration, emergency medical technician, and so on. Many of these courses are offered at night or on weekends for adults working full-time or changing careers. Increasingly, many community colleges are finding that they need to also provide remedial courses for a significant number of students who are not yet qualified to take college-level classes. In short, community college students widely range in age, life experiences and varying degree of academic preparation.

Given the difficult job market for Ph.D.s and postdocs at four-year institutions, a number of universities are responding by offering special training and even certificates for their graduate students who want to consider community college faculty positions. (Some are even doing so for those interested in teaching at private high schools.) These graduate institutions are realizing that the preparation required to be competitive within a community college application is quite different than what is required at a research or even four-year liberal arts institution. [5]

Temple University has a Teaching in Higher Education Certificate Program where graduate students "can earn the certificate to enhance their knowledge of how people learn, develop best teaching practices and improve their career prospects". [6]

What are some of the motivations behind Ph.D.s and postdocs who teach at a community college? Dave Marasco, a materials science Ph.D. from Northwestern University, teaches physics at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, California. He notes that as a Ph.D. student he basically did experimental work 24 hours per day, seven days per week, which he loved although he wasn't sure how long he could keep up that pace. However, he noticed that after his advisor got tenure, the advisor spent less and less time in the laboratory and more and more time raising money. This didn't appeal at all to Marasco. As he put it, "I was looking for the magic window between being in the laboratory but having to worry about tenure and not being in the lab and having to raise money." He didn't see much of a window and since he really enjoyed teaching, he looked for a way to make a living doing just that and a community college provided the opportunity.

Sarah Parikh is also at Foothill College where she teaches physics and engineering courses. She has a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering from nearby Stanford University. As Parikh puts it, "I was always taking notes in class on how I would teach the subject to kindergartners or to explain complicated material in a way that others could understand." This led her to consider a liberal arts or community college where teaching was key. As

she further noted, "I realized that at institutions where research exists, it usually becomes dominant and teaching is always secondary and I didn't want that for myself."

It is important to keep in mind, however, as Michaeleen Lee, a chemistry professor at Bucks County Community College in Newtown, Pennsylvania, notes "Teaching at a community college is not lecturing; it's more hands-on, more office hours, more individual tutoring. You have to do a lot more work as a teacher, because students are not nearly as prepared." [7]

Indeed, understanding the many realities of academic life at a two-year college with teaching commitments of five courses a semester, no research assistants, little administrative support, no teaching assistants, and minuscule travel budgets, is important. Furthermore, most community college departments have a limited set of offerings since they are small and only cover lower division courses. This means that in your career you may end up teaching the same course over and over for many years, say, introductory mechanics 50 or more times. Some people run into "burnout" in such circumstances while others seem to find a way to modify, if not the course material itself, the way to present it. Of course conducting scholarship in teaching and learning is an exciting and never-ending challenge in itself.

At community colleges all the grading and evaluation is done by the professors themselves. As Marasco notes, "It isn't just about delivering the content, all of the work of evaluation also falls upon our shoulders as well." Also, particularly in small community colleges, administrative responsibilities and expectations around service can be relatively large compared to other types of institutions.

There is also a distinction to be made between tenure track faculty and adjuncts who teach part-time, sometimes indefinitely. These part-time positions can be fine if they are a supplement to another full-time activity such as being a graduate student or postdoc or working full-time in government or industry, but it can be quite taxing if it is your only source of income. Most adjuncts get paid by the classroom contact hour and in order to accumulate an acceptable salary such "road scholars" often have to travel to two or more community colleges teaching part-time in each one.

The main thing to keep in mind is that the sole focus at community colleges is in teaching and learning and in this sense it is different from liberal arts schools and state colleges where some kind of research/scholarship is expected. Certainly there is a role for the "scholarship of teaching and learning" in community colleges but if you do such work it will almost certainly have to be based on what takes place in your classroom.

What do you need to do and know before applying for community college positions?

Above all you need to be able to show that you have investigated community colleges prior to applying for a position and that your decision to apply is a high priority. The competition is such that you will have no chance if you give the impression that teaching at a two-year college is a "plan B" priority for you. You can start by visiting local community colleges and talking with deans, department chairs, and other faculty and with

other students as well. Ask if you can visit a class or two as an observer. You have to convince the hiring committee that you are someone they want to see in front of a classroom.

To help make this case, Parikh, of Foothill College took education classes at Stanford while a graduate student and made it a point to serve as a teaching assistant lower-division classes not just upper division or graduate courses.

Next, consider a part-time adjunct position for 1-2 semesters to see if this is something you would really like and want to do. If you are willing to teach a class early in the morning, in the evening, or on Saturdays, your chances of getting the opportunity will go up. Having such experience of course greatly improves your application for a full-time position (see below).

It is important to check on community college credential requirements as they vary among schools. Your Ph.D. will be more than enough to qualify you as a subject matter expert but there may be other things such as state and district credential requirements that you need to meet. Also, keep an eye out for community college job fairs where you can get much of this information in one place at one time.

Another step is for you to learn a lot about distance learning and online teaching as these approaches are a big component of instruction at many community colleges. Indeed, as noted earlier, much of the pioneering work in distance education has come from two-year institutions that saw early its economic potential.

As Marasco points out: "Not only should candidates get as much classroom experience as possible while graduate students and postdocs, but they should try out innovative pedagogy. One of the things that will be asked at your interview is if your teaching has involved anything beyond the typical lecture. If the answer is yes, then I'll want to know what you found that worked, and what didn't work, and why. We want to hire people who are thinking about how to be the best teacher they can be."

Fé Brittain at Pima County Community College in Arizona suggests that you consider taking courses in "second language acquisition and in course assessment and teaching methodology to prepare yourself for teaching, not just for lecturing." [8]

It is important to recognize that student diversity is a big component of most community colleges and that you need to understand why this is important. It is not just a matter of having students of different races and ethnicities, economic status, or the first in their family to go to college. It is about the fact that many of your students have been told they don't belong in college and that you are aware of this and that you can find ways to encourage and support them.

What does it take to get the job offer you will want and accept?

Keep in mind that there are several steps when you apply for any job, and that the purpose of each step except the last is to get you to the next step, not the job itself. In

each step you need to provide certain concentrated amounts of information, but not everything needed for a final decision. For example, your cover letter and CV are designed to get you a first interview that more often than not will be by telephone or video via Skype. (See section 5 above for do's and don'ts of tele-interviews.) The Skype interview is designed to lead to a campus visit invitation. The campus visit is designed to get you an offer but usually not until after you follow up the visit with further information such as thank you notes, specific material requested, and the like. Once you have an offer then it is a matter of negotiation to get to the "win-win." All of the above points have been covered earlier in this book in Chapter 9, but now we want to focus on the uniqueness of a community college application.

Teaching experience needs to be the first thing on your CV where you describe what you taught, to whom, and how. Enthusiasm is really important in a community college faculty applicant; the search committee needs to see that you are excited about teaching. You need to be prepared to be asked to teach a class or a section of a class.

Some schools may even ask you to give a short demonstration, for example, explaining how a particular device such as a toy or a plastic model of a heart works. The key here is to think of the committee as your students and to not spend the time saying what you would do if you had more time, but rather making your explanation complete in and of itself.

Rob Jenkins, an associate professor of English and director of the Writers Institute at Georgia Perimeter College, advises not to talk too much during your interview, i.e., remember where you are and don't talk very much about your dissertation research, don't patronize your interviewers, and don't drop names of prominent people in your field whom you've met at conferences. He goes on to say, "Don't ramble on about all the millions of dollars your university invests in your discipline. Resist the urge to make lofty pronouncements about your specialty, assuming that because committee members are just community-college professors, they don't know as much about the field as you do. (Hint: Many of them do.)" [9]

Finally, there are two great ways to keep up with the issues facing community colleges as well as all of higher education. The first is through a free subscription to the *Inside Higher Ed* daily posting to which you can subscribe at: <http://www.insidehighered.com/>. The second approach is to subscribe to the daily online postings from *the Chronicle of Higher Education* that also contains a community college section. You can try a six-month digital paid subscription by going to:

<https://www.pubservice.com/Subnew1page.aspx?PC=HE&PK=MHEWH1>.

Helpful links

* **A Community College Teaching Career**

http://www.mla.org/commcollege_teachcar

* **Can I Teach at a Community College?**

<http://chronicle.com/article/Can-I-Teach-at-a-Community/124528/>

* **Interviewing at a Two-year College**

<http://chronicle.com/article/Interviewing-at-a-Two-Year-/44744/>

* Two-Year College Interview Questions

<http://serc.carleton.edu/NAGTWorkshops/careerprep/jobsearch/2YC-InterviewQuestions.html>

* The Hiring Process for Community College Faculty

<http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/cgi-bin/tomprof/posting.php?ID=1118>

References

- [1] Adamowicz, C. On adjunct labor and community colleges. Academe Online. Accessed on November 22, 2011.
<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/2007/ND/Feat/adam.htm>
- [2] Fry, R. (October 29, 2009.) College enrollment hits all-time high, fueled by community college surge. Pew Research Center Publications
<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1391/college-enrollment-all-time-high-community-college-surge>
- [3] National Center for Educational Statistics <https://nces.ed.gov>
- [4] National Center for Educational Statistics <https://nces.ed.gov>
- [5] Moltz, D. (August 25, 2010.) What your Ph.D. didn't cover. Inside Higher Ed.
<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/08/25/certificates#ixzz1cOGwnxdv>
- [6] Teaching in higher education T.H.E. certificate program. Temple University Teaching and Learning Center. Accessed on November 2, 2011.
<http://www.temple.edu/tlc/events/thec/thec.htm>
- [7] Webb, S. (May 25, 2007.) Community college faculty: must love to teach. Science Careers from the journal Science.
http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2007_05_25/caredit.a0700074
- [8] Brittain, F. Opportunities for Ph.D.s in the Community Colleges. Association of Departments of Foreign Languages Bulletin. Vol. 31, No. 1, Fall 1999
http://www.mla.org/bulletin_311013
- [9] Jenkins, R. (February 11, 2008) The Community-College Interview: What Not to Do. The Chronicle of Higher Education.
https://webspaces.utexas.edu/cherwitz/www/ie/rob_jenkins.html

#2 Becoming a Community College Professor

Career Tools | by Justin Zackal*

<https://www.higheredjobs.com>

Wednesday, June 11, 2014

There are more than 3,000 open faculty positions at community colleges posted on HigherEdJobs. The talent pool may be more diverse than you think. Applicants may not have any experience teaching at a community college. They might be adjuncts, professors at four-year universities, high school teachers, and often times, industry experts looking to apply their field experience in an educational setting.

How do you give yourself an edge when making the transition?

Jerry Boyd made the transition. He started in the restaurant business and now, decades later, he's the associate vice president for learning and institutional effectiveness at Frederick (Md.) Community College. Part of his job, as dean for the arts and sciences at Frederick, is hiring quality faculty members, just as he did for 18 years when he worked at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA). During his time at NOVA he hired more than 40 faculty members and hundreds of adjuncts during a retirement boom in the early 2000s.

Boyd offers tips for aspiring faculty members to make the transition and land a job at a community college, especially for those with no previous teaching experience.

Establish a presence. This doesn't mean reading a job posting and cold-calling the hiring manager. This starts much earlier. Boyd recommends doing "footwork" by scheduling a meeting with a department chair, asking to observe a class and obtaining first-hand knowledge from professors about what it takes to teach.

Teach a continuing education course. The best entry point is meeting with the director of continuing education. Leading non-credit career training or personal enrichment courses are great ways to obtain teaching experience.

"Once they've taught in continuing ed, they have teaching skills," Boyd says. "So that transfers into a credit area."

Offer to collaborate. If you're working in an industry, you are hard at work and may not have time to teach a class on the side. You can still establish a presence and obtain experience by partnering with community colleges by offering students academic-based internships at your company or serving on a community college advisory committee.

"One of the things we love doing is establishing partnerships," says Boyd. "If somebody is an industry expert and they're really good at what they do, and they come to the college, the college is hungry for input from the community and from the industry."

All of Frederick Community College's career programs have advisory boards that welcome participation from people in industry.

"They can have a major role in helping guide the curriculum of the program with their expertise," Boyd says. "We've had people who joined our advisory boards and then served on our faculty."

Accentuate your leadership skills. If you're working outside of higher education there are certain skills you need to highlight on a resume and emphasize during an interview.

"My transition from the restaurant business was facilitated because a lot of what I was doing was training staff," Boyd says "I was able to articulate that so they hired me without teaching experience because I had underscored the fact that training was part of

my job."

Be an engaging adjunct. If you've landed an adjunct position, but would like to move into a full-time faculty position, Boyd's recommendation is to get to know the college beyond the classroom experience. That means volunteering to serve on committees or participating on an assessment project. Sitting full-time faculty members have an advantage over adjuncts for jobs because some adjuncts don't have experience with community or governance.

Seek help with classroom management. The biggest challenge for new professors is classroom management, but failing at it is not the biggest mistake. Community colleges can be especially challenging for new instructors to understand the shared learning experience with diverse student bodies consisting of 18-, 30- and 50-year-olds in a classroom, but according to Boyd a common pitfall is going at it alone.

"The mistake is when somebody doesn't get help when help is needed. There's plenty of help. We assign mentors (to adjuncts) and (there are) program managers and department chairs and deans all of whom are charged with giving support to faculty," says Boyd.

You might not want to go back. Boyd couldn't identify a particular industry whose workers make the transition to a community college professor easier than others, but he said most find it hard to go back after teaching.

"The idea of taking what you know and transferring it in a meaningful way, it's personally transformational," says Boyd. "There was nothing more transformational than when I taught my first class. I think that happens with a lot of people."

Of the faculty Boyd has hired, that's the one constant theme.

"Nearly everyone one of them at some point in the interview said how enthusiastic they are about working with community college students," Boyd says. "Once you've taught a class, particularly in a community college, it's really an incredible experience."

***About Justin Zackal**

Justin Zackal is a freelance writer with more than 11 years' experience in higher education communications. The winner of the 2009 national "Story of the Year" in the Fred Stabley Sr. Writing Contest, Zackal writes everything from career advice to sports feature stories. Follow him on [Google+](#) or on Twitter [@justinzackal](#).

#3 Teaching at a Community College: Some Personal Observations

John H. Ball*

April 2010

American Historical Association <https://www.historians.org>

Given the current state of the economy and the challenges of the job market for historians, it is increasingly necessary for new PhDs to consider broadening their career options. One such career path that is often overlooked is teaching at two-year institutions. My hope is that my own experiences of teaching at a community college can be useful for others who may be thinking about teaching history at a two-year institution.

The first major adjustment I had to make as an instructor at a community college was the shift from the specific to the general. Before taking my first job at a two-year institution, I had just finished my dissertation, and as an adjunct I had taught specialty courses at a university. Most of my prepared syllabi were for upper division courses. At that point, for me, a “general” survey course meant early modern Europe: a topic that made up at most one third of a semester-long Western Civilization course. So a great adjustment was needed when I began teaching Western Civilization I and II, as well as the first half of American history.

Initially, I was worried about how limiting it would feel to be primarily teaching survey courses. I don’t think this question can be answered comprehensively after only a few years of teaching, but it has not felt constraining so far. As the two Western Civilization courses cover vast geographic and temporal areas, I have found them to be an invitation to pursue whatever has struck me as academically interesting. Teaching these courses has given me perhaps the greatest intellectual freedom I have had since looking for a dissertation topic at the start of graduate school. I have read widely this year on topics from ancient Rome to medieval philosophy to World War II, and I have been able to bring most of my research directly into my classes. And it has also become clear from conversations with my colleagues that there are many ways to avoid simply teaching the same two classes for decades. The real joy of the survey course is that it is broad enough to contain just about anything that an instructor wishes to include. My colleagues constantly add to their survey courses based on new readings and research. Many shift the focus of their courses from year to year, depending on their interests at the time, or based upon input from the students at the start of the semester. Most community college programs include 200-level specialty courses for further diversity, and some professors teach as adjuncts at local universities to broaden their teaching opportunities.

The second major transition I faced at the community college was the teaching load. The standard course load for two-year schools is five classes per semester. And most instructors, at least in their first years while dealing with debt from graduate school, student loans, and saving for a house, often choose to teach overloads. This often leads to teaching loads of as many as six or seven classes a term in addition to summer classes. Teaching five or more classes each semester seemed overwhelming at first, especially coming out of a research institution where anything over a 2/3 class load was seen by many to be a “bad job.” But what the 5/5+ load reflects is the central focus of community colleges: that professors are expected to put teaching first, last, and always. So, what did the 5/5 class-load mean for me? Depending on the school, class sizes tend to be capped

somewhere between 25–35 students, so I taught roughly 150–175 students per semester at the low end. These five courses will typically be sections of two to four different classes. The load indeed is heavy, but it is manageable. And when compared to teaching at a four-year state university with huge lecture classes, possibly not a much greater number of total students. Where the teaching load really has an impact, however, is in grading. There are no teaching assistants at community colleges; so the professor has to grade every paper and exam. Given this, it puts a real limit on how much an instructor can work on writing with students, and for better or for worse, in many classes (although I am still resisting this), multiple-choice exams become the norm.

Behind the question of how one manages a 5/5 teaching load lurks a more challenging query: Is it possible to maintain one's own research and ties to the scholarly community while teaching at a community college? While a 5/5 teaching load is certainly manageable, it also clearly means that the focus of the job will be on teaching and not on research. From speaking with my more experienced community college colleagues, I have learned that the teaching load and lack of institutional focus upon research does make it a continuing challenge to carve out time for scholarship. But having acknowledged the challenge, many professors at two-year colleges do manage it. It is not unusual for instructors to have their PhDs, and many of these keep up their own scholarship, publish articles and books, and take active roles in the scholarly community. While resources directly supporting research may be very limited at community colleges, most institutions are serious about providing aid under the rubric of "Faculty Development" for conferences. Overall, I have found that community colleges both expect and support maintaining one's scholarly interests and connections, even if pursuing extensive research may become more difficult.

Given the focus upon teaching, students take on a central role in the experience of teaching at a community college. From the very beginning, I was told that "community college students are their own group." What I quickly found was that this did not mean that they are "bad" students. Some are indeed less well prepared, and need more attention to help them develop their skills, but overall they seem to be pretty much the same kinds of students who enter the bulk of the four year institutions. Many of my students chose to do their first two years of study at a community college and then planned to transfer in their third year to finish their bachelor's degrees. Moreover, many students are enrolled in four-year universities concurrently, and are using the community colleges to fill out requirements for their degrees. Obviously, economics has a great deal to do with this. Given the rising costs of education, it is often significantly cheaper to do the first two years of a degree at a community college before finishing at a university. But many students also choose community colleges because they offer much better support networks, tutoring, smaller class sizes, and more personal attention than can be found at many universities.

What does make the students at community colleges different is the amazing diversity of their experiences and skills. A general class will have people from many ethnic and economic backgrounds, and in many cases from many countries. There will be a significant number for whom English is a second language. Many will have just finished

high school, some will have years of college under their belts, and some will be returning students who have advanced degrees and decades of work experience. Most will be in their teens, but many will be in their 20s and 30s, and some will be significantly older. What makes this group challenging is that a good class allows those who are less experienced to develop their skills, while still offering the most dedicated students a chance to pursue their academic interests as fully as possible. I am still working out the best way to address this, and probably will be doing so as long as I am in the classroom. I try to include multiple levels of material, from the basic narratives of history to detailed work on primary sources, to the limited inclusion of monographs. I have found that this allows me at least to give students a taste of where they could go if they choose to study history further, while still engaging the students who will never take another history course.

There is no doubt that such diversity poses special challenges from a pedagogical point of view, but at its best it makes for an amazingly dynamic classroom. Besides the broad variety of their backgrounds, students at a community college are often working full time, they have families, some are retired from the work force, and some are veterans. For most of them, school is something they have chosen to do, and have made significant sacrifices just to get through the classroom door. All of this means that they have a great deal of outside personal experience to bring to a historical discussion. This was deeply intimidating at first, but I quickly realized that the discussions in class were some of the most vibrant and purely interesting ones I have ever encountered. It was discussions like these that drove home to me a real answer to the question of “why does history matter?” In the discussions, my students connected their own experiences to the history they were studying, not as an academic exercise, but as way to talk about very real questions of religion, politics, family, war, and others that they were dealing with as part of their daily lives.

So, in the end, I have found my first year teaching at a community college to be a very rewarding one. It has required a shift away from the world of research and writing, which is a change I am still working through, but it has offered a significant amount in return. I have found a great deal of freedom in the classroom, institutional backing for maintaining my scholarly connections, and interesting and supportive colleagues. Perhaps most important of all, I have found students who have challenged me to rethink how I look at history. And in the end, isn't that the best thing one can find in one's classes?

** John Ball teaches history at the Dale Mabry Campus of Hillsborough Community College in Tampa, Florida.*