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A Commitment to Teaching, Learning, and Student Advocacy: Community College Careers

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Introduction

Community colleges are the most diverse institutions of higher education in the United States. The American Association of Community Colleges (Fast Facts 2017) reports that approximately 12 million students attend a community college throughout the country. Over one half, or 57%, of these students are women. When considering race and ethnicity, the community college student body is quite diverse: 27% are Hispanic, 13% are African American, 44% are White, 6% are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% are Native American. Additionally, 29% are first-generation, 15% are single parents, and 20% are students with disabilities.

Most graduate students in political science attend and receive their training at less diverse R1 universities where research is the main driver of pursuits (for a discussion of careers at R1 institutions, see chapter 40). With this experience comes an overwhelming emphasis on research and underwhelming experiences with teaching and pedagogy training. Some faculty members and advisors may push students to apply for jobs at R1 institutions while actively discouraging applications to community colleges or other teaching centered positions. On the contrary, graduate students in political science can thrive in community colleges, particularly if they love teaching, are dedicated to student success, and are committed to the student empowerment mission of community colleges. In this chapter, we will examine three areas: commitment to teaching as a career, commitment to teaching and student learning, and a commitment to student advocacy and communities.

Commitment to Teaching as a Career

A commitment to teaching is essential for any community college professor. Graduate students are mostly trained to be researchers, while their teaching knowledge, skills, and abilities are largely ignored. This is not surprising, given that students are trained by research faculty and not teaching faculty. However, community college careers are rewarding professionally, personally, and financially. Community colleges offer a viable and preferred career option for political science graduate students who have a commitment to teaching, learning, student advocacy, and to the communities in which these institutions serve.

Types of Community Colleges

There are at least six types of two-year *community college institutions*: public and private, union and non-

union, and tenure and non-tenure (Smith 2021). Public community colleges are typically governed by locally elected Board of Trustees, who are members of the community, while private community colleges are run by non-profit or for-profit corporations. Some public institutions have faculty unions, which is largely determined by state laws that permit the right to organize and collectively bargain. Unions formally bargain with a community college district's administration for salaries, benefits, and working conditions. Finally, positions at community colleges may be tenured or non-tenured, which means there is assurance of long-term employment or not.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (National Center for Education Statistics n.d.), from 2016 to 2017 the average annual salary for full-time instructional faculty at a two-year public institution was \$67,684 compared with \$53,017 at two-year private institutions. These averages were slightly higher for men versus women faculty members. The NCES suggests a geographical relationship with those higher education institutions that collectively bargain, in that the “the mid-Atlantic Census region and California contain 46% of all unionized faculty observations but only 26% of all faculty observation[s]” (Wassell et al. 2015, 9). As a result, unionized faculty are concentrated in specific geographical regions, and they tend to benefit from higher salaries.

The Competitive Community College Job Market

While searching for jobs within community colleges, competition is fierce. Take steps to ensure that you are prepared to hit the job market. First, make sure you check job postings via APSA eJobs,¹ HigherEd-Jobs,² and state-specific registries, such as CCC Registry.³ Make an effort to seek out community college job sites, too, since many do not have budgets to advertise nationally. An often-overlooked aspect of applying to community college positions is to obtain your master's degree. PhD programs have different requisites for obtaining the degree, but typically a student is able to obtain their master's enroute to their doctorate after they successfully advance to candidacy. In order to teach at community colleges, you must obtain your master's degree; being “All But Dissertation” (ABD) is not recognized as a credential for teaching (see chapters 14 and 15 for more information about the dissertation and master's thesis).

Finally, do your best to earn teaching experience. Obtaining experience as an Instructor of Record for a class is required by community colleges, but even gaining experience as a teaching assistant can also help you prepare to lead a class on your own in the future. Ask your department if you are able to teach a summer school course once you have obtained your master's. Reach out to neighboring community colleges and apply to be placed into their adjunct pool. Although some faculty members may discourage students from teaching, these experiences can be crucial toward helping you earn the experience needed to be invited for an interview.

Advice for Your Job Application

As you find job opportunities, you should dissect each opportunity. The call for a position is one of the most important aspects to how you should craft your application materials. Most applications require you to submit an online application that should include: a cover letter; a teaching pedagogy and philosophy narrative (sometimes this is the same as the cover letter, sometimes these can be separate); a curriculum vitae or resume; unofficial copies of college transcripts; equivalency documents (if necessary); and two or three letters of recommendation.

While these may all seem like standard documents, create all application materials so that they speak directly to each of the minimum, desired qualifications of the position. For example, if the job description⁴ has four minimum requirements and five desirable requirements, your cover letter should speak directly to each of those nine requirements. Committees sort through hundreds of applications, so it is very easy to rule out candidates based upon whether or not they followed directions or meet these qualifications.

What Are Community Colleges Looking for?

Teaching and service. Community college instructors are typically responsible for teaching a 5-5 course load during the academic year, and community colleges want to hire the best teachers. Highlighting your experience (and ideally experience as an Instructor of Record at a community college) is a must! Indicate service to any affiliated institution and to the community at large. Community college faculty are asked to serve on various committees, and the search committee will be looking for who is willing to contribute to these discussions on curriculum, campus planning, and equity. Whereas you might be tempted to highlight your dissertation or research publications, you should prioritize your teaching, pedagogy, and service.

What About Some “Don’ts?”

Generally speaking, do not ever state or even imply that this position is a “backup” position or a steppingstone to another opportunity. Secondly, do not ask about a research budget, or how many teaching assistants are provided. Unless explicitly stated in the job description or the college’s website, most community college positions do not require research and publishing, and most do not provide teaching assistants to assist with grading or classroom logistics.

What About Some “Dos?”

Make sure that your letter writers can speak to teaching and mentoring abilities, and to interactions with students and colleagues. Share student evaluations with those writing recommendations so they can cite what students are saying about teaching strengths. If there is little formal teaching, consider highlighting experiences indicating a future ability to teach. Be creative and honest about teaching experiences; not all forms of teaching are done directly in the classroom. Overall, the entire portfolio of materials must speak to the needs of the diverse academic, socioeconomic, cultural, disability, and racial and ethnic backgrounds of community college students.

What Are Hiring Committees Looking for?

Community colleges seek committed educators who embrace the realities of working with community college students. The *hiring committee* looks for these characteristics in the application materials, letter, the CV, and the teaching portfolio. In the application letter, make sure to convey the desire to teach courses allowed at the institution. Community colleges do not teach all political science subfields, so communicate through these materials the understanding of what courses are taught at the college and the ability to teach the courses offered. Know the modalities for courses offered and highlight training in online teaching. When listing courses taught as instructor of record, clearly delineate which and how many courses were taught each semester.

Another ability hiring committees look for in the application letter is knowledge about the community college’s specific student body and how best to work with their students. Discuss training in inclusive course design and bandwidth recovery techniques. Share student stories that show how pedagogy and course design address the diversity of learners in a community college classroom. Are students’ political histories incorporated into the curriculum? Are students empowered to participate in their democracy? Does course design support underrepresented students? Utilize a broad definition of diversity: growth areas for community colleges are dual credit or early college students, so indicate training or experiences teaching high school students.

Along with being committed to educating a diverse classroom, committees are looking for colleagues who are committed to institutional success. Express how you are a value-add for the department and what you can bring to the department and in service to the college. Be prepared to share ideas or experiences about mentoring, diversity and inclusion, professional development, rigor, or college success and transfer initiatives.

Finally, find out details about teaching demonstrations. Clarify expectations on the course topic, any specific teaching skills to incorporate, and other parameters for the demonstration. Can materials

be given ahead of time to students, or can handouts be given to the audience? Will it be recorded? Are there any audience members with known ADA accommodations? Pro tip: inclusive, active learning is preferred to straight, PowerPoint lectures. Use this opportunity to highlight pedagogical and subject areas strengths! (See chapter 29 for information about preparing for your first teaching experience.)

You Got the Job, Now What?

Congratulations! As with all positions, academic or non-academic, take some time to celebrate this accomplishment! One of the first things to do is to read the union contract, if applicable. These contracts provide information about teaching loads, service expectations, contractual obligations, and salary schedules. Another important thing to note is to provide the years of teaching (whether K12, serving as a teaching assistant, or teaching as a graduate instructor) to Human Resources to make sure the salary schedule step reflects this experience. Check the Faculty Handbook to get familiar with the institution's procedures and rules.

Finally, find a mentor within the department or campus. Prepare for the school year and develop syllabi basing assignments, classroom activities, and assessments on class size, which can range from 25-50 students per course. The “base load” for most faculty members at community colleges is five to five, meaning five courses in the fall, and five in the winter/spring. It is generally advised to avoid service commitments during the first year to ensure time is devoted to improving your teaching and supporting the learning of your students.

Commitment to Teaching and Student Learning

At the heart of community college teaching is diversity, equity, and inclusion, and culturally responsive teaching. Community colleges commit to teaching excellence and to a social justice-driven duty to accessibility. Most community colleges have similar institutional characteristics as a result. For example, community colleges are open access institutions. This means that all students are accepted. Community colleges are low-cost to no-cost attendance institutions to make higher education accessible, too.

Community colleges are student-centered. This means that all employees focus on student retention and student success. Faculty success is defined by student success. Courses are offered online, face-to-face, throughout the day, evening and the weekend. Fundamentally, community colleges serve the entire distribution of students, not just the upper 10% of students like most four-year universities and colleges. Faculty must know how to educate military veterans, international students, English-language learners, teenagers and seniors, students with disabilities, students with families and full-time jobs, and students with GEDs to AP credit.

This means that professional development is continuous and should include pedagogy, diversity, inclusion, and bandwidth recovery techniques. Professional development can count as continuing education for states that require continuing education credits. Finally, professional development keeps us current. The commitment to teaching and learning implies striving to be a better educator and to recognize the social, economic, and political role community colleges play in the lives of their students.

When Research Serves Teaching and Learning

It is important to note that “teaching and research need not be mutually exclusive goals” (Wladis and Mesa 2019, 1591). In fact, “community college professors are educationally trained to conduct research as eighteen percent of all full-time U.S. community college faculty and 25% in education and social sciences have doctorates” (Wladis and Mesa 2019, 1593). As a result, there are many community college faculty members who are trained and have an interest in conducting research in their disciplines, pedagogical research, scholarship on teaching and learning along with civically engaged research (Jackson et al. 2021, 721).

The missions of community colleges center around faculty engaging in effective teaching practices, providing students with an excellent value for their educational financial investment and provid-

ing support services to recruit and retain students while helping them persist until degree completion. Community college faculty are not readily known as researchers engaged in the teacher-scholar model; however, many faculty members engage in research that aids their disciplines, colleges, communities, and students.

Faculty indicate that their reasons for not being as engaged in professional development activities and in research activities at community colleges are because of a lack of time, high teaching loads, that administrators, faculty, and staff do not value or reward these types of productive activities, and that some faculty have been dis-incentivized from conducting research (Wladis and Mesa 2019). Wladis and Mesa (2019) suggest that community colleges need to change their culture to incentivize faculty research by those who have an interest, are qualified, and are able to conduct generalizable/transferable education research. Colleges can consider providing faculty with small research grants and support faculty through providing set aside time or course load reductions for faculty members conducting research that will benefit their students, college, or departments.

Commitment to Student Advocacy and Communities

Community college faculty wear multiple hats: teacher, social worker, consigliere, career advisor, ombudsman, food banker and, most importantly, that of student advocate. Students are their best advocates, and faculty can amplify their needs and wants. For example, shared governance (Kater and Levin 2004; Reed 2017), the process of aggregating input from campus constituencies, is an important avenue for students to make their voice heard. For example, in California, all community college districts have campus committees where staff, faculty, and administrators discuss policies and issues affecting the whole campus. Faculty members can encourage students to serve on these committees, promote the allocation of stipends from campus-based funds, and support students who do ask questions and speak up during these meetings.

Co-curricular (Glass et al. 2017) and extracurricular activities (Schudde 2019), such as clubs and organizations, speech and debate teams, athletic sports teams, and community organizations are avenues for student engagement and skill development. Faculty can support these organizations by serving as unpaid or paid advisors, support the allocation of funding to these student organizations through campus budgeting processes, and attend events and competitions to support students. Additionally, faculty can encourage their college's communications teams and leadership to recognize students in campus newsletters and during governing board members. For example, Cuyamaca College President Dr. Julianna Barnes reported to the Governing Board that alumnus Ridwaan Mohamed was a featured speaker for Historically Black College/University (HBCU) Highlight Week hosted by the California Community College to HBCU Transfer Pathway.

A commitment to diversity and inclusion expands from the classroom to the communities in which students live. Understanding the social and economic realities of students should be reflected in course design details and in recognizing all students' needs influence success in education. For example, professors can pursue service-related roles in the college and in student communities. Some colleges offer a variety of resources for students including food pantries, mental health counseling, and sometimes even childcare. However, some offer few resources. Faculty can embed themselves in these conversations at the college and in community groups that create equitable resources to help students be successful in the classroom. Being a student advocate means being aware of college and local government resources to meet student needs.

Conclusion

Each of the authors teach at colleges with institutional and geographic diversity. The benefits of teaching at community colleges include having the ability as instructors to work closely with our students in primarily small class environments. We also enjoy the privilege of introducing our students to political science, many of whom may have never previously taken a political science course. As we are broadly trained in our discipline, most community college instructors are generalists teaching diverse politi-

cal science courses including Introduction to Political Science, American Government, International Relations, and Political Theory. There are also opportunities to engage in training about equitable and effective teaching practices that enhance student learning outcomes. The salary and benefits are often competitive with liberal arts colleges and can be more lucrative depending on the negotiation efforts of the faculty member, whether the institution is unionized versus non-union, and whether the position is tenure-track or non-tenure track.

In bringing balance to the vast benefits of pursuing a full-time, community college career, there are also challenges to consider. While faculty members at community colleges provide service to their students, the campus community, and the community at large, as well as conduct pedagogical and disciplinary research, their primary focus is providing effective and quality teaching. Therefore, faculty teach up to five course preparations each semester, and can teach up to 250 students per semester. The grading and course assessment are the responsibility of the instructor. Additional challenges to consider are that some community colleges do not offer disciplinary majors or associate degrees in political science, and if they do, there may be a low number of declared majors. There may also be limitations on the curriculum offered, given state laws or regulations. Despite these challenges, however, teaching at a community college can be one of the most rewarding and fulfilling careers for graduate students in political science.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.apsanet.org/eJobs>
- 2 <https://www.higheredjobs.com/faculty/search.cfm?JobCat=90>
- 3 <https://www.cccregistry.org/jobs/index.aspx>
- 4 <https://gocommunitycolleges.com/job-descriptions>

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