**Why You Should Consider Community Colleges**



By Rob Jenkins January 06, 2014

Reading over my [two](http://chronicle.com/article/Making-It-Past-the-First-Round/142253) most [recent](https://chronicle.com/article/How-the-Job-Search-Differs-at/143089/) columns on job hunting at community colleges, I'm afraid I might have discouraged some graduate students from applying. That was not my intention, although I can't help being reminded of the answer Flannery O'Connor supposedly gave an interviewer who asked if she thought writing programs were squelching young writers: "Not enough of them."

Seriously, though, I've been trying to be as candid as possible about both the advantages and disadvantages of a faculty career at a community college. But in my pursuit of honesty, I may have focused too much on the negative—specifically, on the fact that it can be just as hard to land a job at a two-year college as at a four-year campus, and sometimes harder. If that's the case, some of you have no doubt wondered, then why bother?

I'll try to answer that question here with a few reasons that you should not only bother, but seriously consider, applying to community colleges.

**The numbers game.** Simply put: There are more qualified people looking for full-time teaching positions than there are positions. That's true across academe, including at community colleges.

However, if you want to play the numbers game, try these: This country has about 1,300 two-year institutions, which together account for about a third of the higher-education sector. In any given year, 35 to 40 per cent of the full-time teaching positions advertised in *The Chronicle* and elsewhere are at community colleges. Nearly half of all undergraduates in the United States attend two-year colleges. Those numbers will only grow, as community colleges expand their programs and as the economic recovery struggles to sustain momentum.

It seems to me that, if you're aiming for a faculty career, eliminating from consideration over a third of the potential full-time jobs might not be the wisest move.

**Credentials.** Because accrediting bodies require a master's degree for teaching freshman- and sophomore-level courses, community colleges have traditionally hired mostly M.A.'s (and M.S.'s), and many still do. But it is true that we're hiring more Ph.D.'s these days, largely because there are so many on the job market. It's also true that having a Ph.D. makes a candidate a little more competitive at many two-year institutions. But you can still get a full-time teaching job at a community college with "just" a master's.

If you have a master's, and are wondering whether you should pursue a Ph.D., here's a factor to consider: Most two-year colleges are part of state systems and offer tuition reimbursement for employees attending state institutions. That's especially attractive in large metro areas like Atlanta, where I live, with multiple research universities within easy driving distance. Half of the Ph.D.'s I know at my college got their terminal degrees after they started working for us full time, and I know several others who are now in Ph.D. programs.

As I mentioned, having a Ph.D. improves your chances of being hired nowadays on the two-year market. In addition, with a Ph.D., you'll probably start out at a higher salary and perhaps a higher rank (maybe assistant professor instead of instructor). And your doctorate makes you well qualified for administrative assignments down the road, should you choose to go that route. At community colleges, as in most of academe, administration is where the real money is.

**Teaching mission.** Perhaps, like me, you discovered in graduate school that you like the teaching part of being a college professor a lot more than the research part—or at least you like it just as well. If so, then community colleges may be ideally suited for you.

At most community colleges, teaching and teaching-related activities will be almost all of your work responsibilities. In addition to teaching five classes each semester (the typical load), you'll advise students, serve on curriculum committees, attend occasional pedagogical and technological workshops, and perhaps offer workshops of your own.

If you love to teach and want to become better at it, community colleges are the place to be.

**Promotion and tenure.** When you're up for promotion and tenure at a community college, you most likely won't be expected to publish. The committee will look primarily at your teaching record. Teaching is, by nature, difficult to evaluate and qualify, despite all of the efforts to measure it. Chances are, if you haven't somehow proved to be a bad teacher, the tenure committee will assume that you're a good teacher, or at least good enough.

Most faculty members at two-year colleges are evaluated in three areas: teaching, service, and professional development. Getting the necessary "points" in service is relatively easy, because as a new hire you'll almost certainly be asked to serve on multiple committees. (Sorry.) "Professional development" is a catch-all category that includes publishing but also attending and perhaps presenting at workshops and conferences. I have known one or two people who were denied tenure because they didn't do any professional development, but if you go to the workshops offered on the campus, attend conferences when you can, and maybe present at one or two, you should be fine.

Some community colleges do require tenure-track faculty members to publish, but not many, and they're mostly in the Northeast.

But at the overwhelming majority of our colleges, earning tenure is basically a matter of checking boxes: For the past three to five years (depending on the college), did you receive satisfactory teaching evaluations? Check. Did you serve actively on numerous committees? Check. Did you attend several workshops and a few conferences and maybe present a couple of times? Check. Congratulations. You've got tenure.

**Salary and benefits.** One thing you'll probably notice as you peruse the job ads (those that list salary ranges, anyway): Starting salaries at most community colleges are surprisingly competitive with those at four-year institutions in the same geographic area, especially for job candidates with Ph.D.'s.

On average, however, professors at four-year institutions make more money over the course of their careers than their counterparts at two-year colleges do. Few community-college professors make six-figure salaries, except perhaps in those parts of the country with a high cost of living. But generally speaking, faculty members at two-year colleges are paid a decent salary, about on par with the K-12 teachers in their area and perhaps a bit more.

And the benefits are great, at least in the four state systems where I've worked. In most states, community-college faculty members receive basically the same (often exactly the same) benefits as those of their colleagues at public universities. No one appears to know how the Affordable Care Act might affect us in the future, but for the time being, teaching is a good profession to be in, benefits-wise, and that's no less true at community colleges.

**Quality of life.** We've read a lot in *The Chronicle* and elsewhere about the stresses of academic life for young faculty members pursuing the holy grail of tenure. We read dire terms, like "publish or perish," describing their predicament.

At most community colleges, that brand of stress is all but nonexistent. Oh, we have our own pressures, to be sure—grading five classes worth of papers, balancing committee work with teaching assignments, trying to get money to attend a conference, preparing to present at next week's departmental "lunch and learn." In short, we're very busy—just as busy, no doubt, as our four-year colleagues are. But we don't usually have hanging over our heads the threat of losing our jobs just because some editor happens to reject a manuscript.

Perhaps as a result, most of the community-college faculty members I know are, like me, relatively happy. We're not oblivious to the fact that the rest of the academic world looks down on us because we're "just" community-college faculty; we simply don't care. We like our work. We like our students. We like our lives. We don't regret our career choice. We are, in a word, content.

**Changing lives.** Why do most people go into teaching? To change lives, right? People who pursue scholarly careers often want to become well-known authorities in their fields. But for those of us drawn to teaching, our motive is usually to change the world one life at a time. Community colleges give you the opportunity to do that.

The nation's very best students—the ones with high SAT scores, from educated families in affluent neighborhood—are going to get good teachers. That's a given. But what about the rest? What about the kids from inner cities or remote rural areas, who might not have gone to the best high schools but still want to earn college degrees and improve their lives? What about the 30- and 40-year-olds who bypassed college to get a job or start a family and now realize they need more education? What about the military veterans who want to start a new life and a new career? Don't they deserve good teachers, too?

Not all community-college students fit into those categories. Many of our colleges have honors programs, and we also serve high-school students who qualify to attend college early. And therein lies the challenge of community-college teaching: In the same class, you might have a teenager with a GED sitting next to 27-year-old Army veteran, or a high-school senior with 1900 on the SAT working on a project with a 30-something mom of three. For me, that's what makes teaching at a community college such a rich, not to mention enriching, experience.

If that sort of thing appeals to you, or intrigues you, or at least doesn't turn you off, then I'd encourage you to consider a teaching career at a community college. Because if someone were to ask me if I thought two-year colleges were attracting the nation's top graduate students, I'd have to echo Flannery O'Connor: Not enough of them.

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