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**How the Job Search Differs at Community Colleges**

***The application, the interview, and even the offer are not the same***

By Rob Jenkins

When I speak with doctoral students about faculty careers at two-year colleges, I'm routinely asked some version of, "How does looking for a job there compare with applying to a four-year college?"

If I'm talking with 50 students, probably at least 40 of them are planning to apply to both two-year and four-year institutions, so it's a good question. Graduate students seem to grasp intuitively that they can't just take a one-size-fits-all approach to the job search, yet they're not quite sure what they need to do differently.

That's probably because, while some graduate schools and departments do a decent job of preparing students for the four-year market (by "four-year," I'm referring to the type of institution, not the duration of the search ... I think), few offer advice on applying to two-year colleges.

Let's fill that gap. Here are some of the key differences between looking for full-time, ­tenure-track jobs at community colleges versus four-year institutions:

**Credentials.** One of the hardest things for graduate students to wrap their minds around is that a degree that qualifies them to teach at a university might not qualify them to teach at a community college. A few years ago, a group of students who were all getting interdisciplinary doctorates in the humanities attended one of my presentations. They assumed that, with a Ph.D., surely they could teach at a two-year college.

Not necessarily. As I explained to them, if you want to teach at a community college, you have to be qualified to teach something we offer—essentially, the core academic subjects that make up the first two years of a university degree. And being "qualified to teach" a subject at a community college means having taken at least 18 graduate credit hours in that subject. Candidates with interdisciplinary degrees might have only 12 or 15 hours in any one area, which presents a problem. It's not an insurmountable one, since they can always go back and pick up another class or two, but Ph.D.'s need to be aware of the requirement before they waste their time or ours. (I've written about the [credit-hour dilemma](http://chronicle.com/article/Can-I-Teach-at-a-Community/124528) in more detail in "Can I Teach at a Community College?")

**Classroom experience.** Another difference between two-year and four-year institutions that graduate students find shocking—heck, sometimes I find it shocking—is that community colleges don't really have an "entry level" teaching job.

Not long ago, I served on a career panel with a brilliant young professor from a top-tier research university. To the obvious delight of the students in the audience, he regaled them with the story of how, after publishing his groundbreaking research while still A.B.D. (all but dissertation), he was immediately snatched up by Top Tier U. At the panel, I was next in line and proceeded to throw cold water on the room by informing them that most community colleges probably wouldn't have hired that brilliant young graduate student.

Why not? Because he hadn't taught any courses.

Four-year institutions often hire Ph.D.'s straight out of graduate school, with little or no teaching experience, but that's rarely true at community colleges. Typically we expect candidates to have at least two to three years of full-time teaching experience, or the equivalent as an adjunct. (For example, a candidate who taught two classes each semester for five years is the equivalent of a full-timer at a community college with a teaching load of five courses a semester.)

**The application.** Because our colleges place so much emphasis on teaching, be sure to use your application—especially the cover letter—to highlight your classroom experience.

In the cover letter for a position at a four-year university—as your graduate adviser and the fine folks at the campus career center have no doubt driven home—you need to talk extensively about your research and, in particular, your dissertation. But the cover letter for an opening at a community college should spend very little time, if any, describing your research. Merely mentioning that you have a Ph.D. and giving the topic of your dissertation is sufficient. Beyond that, devote the bulk of the letter to discussing your teaching experience.

One of the biggest mistakes that some job seekers make is using the same cover letter for every job application (however often they've been told not to do that). It's immediately obvious to those of us who serve on search committees at community colleges—and we're probably not going to be interested in a candidate who doesn't care enough about our institution to write a letter specifically to us, focusing on our position and our job requirements. You can use the same CV in all of your applications, but tailor each cover letter to the specific job, especially if you're applying at both two-year and four-year campuses.

**The interview.** Usually a search committee at a four-year university has to fill a single position. The department may be making multiple hires that year, but each position probably has its own committee.

That means if you get an interview at the university, you are probably one of only three or four candidates (five or six at most) to make it that far, and can expect a fair amount of personal attention. You will probably be on the campus for a day or two, interviewing with the hiring committee, meeting with administrators, giving a job talk to the faculty, perhaps offering a guest lecture to students. In addition, you will probably be flown into town, put up at a nice hotel, and taken to lunch and/or dinner.

If you're fortunate enough to be called for an interview at a community college, the experience will be entirely different. You will probably be one of 10 or 12 candidates, perhaps for more than one position, with as many as half of those candidates being interviewed by the same committee on the same day. You will meet with committee members for an hour, maybe 90 minutes, during which you will answer questions and give a short teaching demonstration. Afterward you may meet with a department chair or dean—but probably not. The community college may or may not cover your travel expenses—something to ask about when the invitation is extended—and will almost certainly not take you to dinner.

The community-college interview has been referred to as a "cattle call" by more than one frustrated job seeker, and I'm afraid sometimes that's an apt description.

**The offer.** Any full-time job offer these days is a cause for celebration. But an offer from a four-year institution is probably just an opening gambit—an indication that you were the department's first choice and a way to initiate negotiations. (The more elite the institution, the more likely that is to be true.) You can then begin discussing such issues as salary, teaching load, and research support.

At a community college, a job offer is an end in itself. I'm going to stop short of saying you can take it or leave it, but that's not far from the truth.

A community college may have a little wiggle room when it comes to salary—although probably not much—but teaching load is nonnegotiable. At a community college, everyone teaches basically the same number of courses (or at least contact hours), unless they have release time for some specific purpose, such as chairing a large committee. That won't apply to you as a new faculty member. And since there's no such thing as "research support" at a community college, there's nothing for you to negotiate in that regard.

If anything I've said has discouraged you from applying to community colleges, please understand that was not my intention. I often tell doctoral students: Given the state of the academic job market and the fact that community colleges make up more than a third of higher education, job seekers would be ill-advised to dismiss that sector as an employment option out of hand.

I just want you to be prepared. The community-college job search is not the one your professors and advisers have been priming you for since you arrived. Chances are no one else has told you these things, and so, like many Ph.D. students, you might have made the mistake of thinking, "Well, if I can't get a job at a four-year school, there's always community colleges." That's just not the case.

Now that you're aware of the differences, you can adjust your expectations about the job market accordingly. We in the community-college sector want to hear from you—if you are willing to meet our requirements.

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[*http://chronicle.com/article/How-the-Job-Search-Differs-at/143089?cid=megamenu*](http://chronicle.com/article/How-the-Job-Search-Differs-at/143089?cid=megamenu)