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**What Community-College Search Committees Wish You Knew**

By Rob Jenkins

Allison M. Vaillancourt's excellent column ["What Search Committees Wish You Knew"](http://chronicle.com/article/What-Search-Committees-Wish/136399/) got me thinking about the differences between the four-year-college job search and the community-college version.

Much of what Allison wrote applies to community colleges, too. But I can think of a few additional pieces of advice that are unique to searches in our sector. Most community colleges hold interviews between spring break in March and the end of the semester, so I'm hopeful that my timing will be about right for the majority of our faculty job candidates. So here's what community-college search committees wish you knew:

**We're not a research institution.** One of the biggest mistakes that job-seekers make, when interviewing at community colleges, is talking too much about their dissertations and research agendas. No offense, but we aren't really interested—at least not during the interview.

The fact that you wrote a dissertation, or that you're in the process of writing one, might have helped you land an interview. Competition is fierce, and, as I've noted in past columns, having a Ph.D. could give you an edge at some community colleges. But we're not particularly curious about the details of your research, because we probably won't view them as relevant to the work you'll be doing for us—teaching service and survey courses to freshmen and sophomores.

Having a research agenda is fine, too, but it's not something you want to spend a lot of time on in your interview. If you do, we'll start to wonder if you know what you're getting yourself into at our college—a teaching load of five courses each semester, minimal support for travel, no research assistant—and if you're actually a good fit for us.

**We're a teaching institution.** If you're hired, you will spend almost half of your time in the classroom. Did I mention the heavy course load? Most of the rest of your time will be spent keeping office hours, advising students, serving on curriculum committees, and fulfilling other teaching-related tasks.

That's why you should devote most of your job interview to talking about teaching. We'll help by asking a lot of varied questions about it, such as your experiences with diversity, educational technology, and classroom management. Stay on topic in your answers, and take every opportunity to highlight your experience and abilities in the classroom.

Give those issues some thought in the days leading up to the interview. If you don't actually have a lot of teaching experience, you should be asking yourself, "How can I emphasize the experience I do have?"

**The teaching demonstration is the most important part.** I can't emphasize that enough. Yet I'm always a bit surprised and dismayed at how some candidates fail to take it seriously and prepare poorly for it.

I covered [this topic](http://chronicle.com/article/Demonstration-or-Demolition-/44842) thoroughly in another column a few years ago, so I won't go into detail again here. Let me just say that, although trying to anticipate the questions you might be asked and prepare good answers can be helpful, the very best use of your time leading up to the interview lies in putting together a killer teaching demo. That will tell us more about your ability in the classroom, and your suitability for our college, than any canned answer to any canned question.

We understand that we might not be your first choice. Few people, and even fewer Ph.D.'s, end up teaching at a community college because that's what they've always wanted to do. Most of us entered graduate school with dreams of working with the best and brightest while doing important research at top-tier universities.

We're not exactly surprised, then, that you had the same dream—or that you might still be pursuing it. We understand that you may be interviewing with us only because you really need a job, and the market is really bad, so you applied everywhere you saw an opening. That's OK. We get some of our best faculty members that way.

Yes, you should probably try to hide the fact that you secretly wonder if interviewing with us represents the death of your dream. But no need to go overboard with false enthusiasm. We get it. Just be pleasant and professional, answer our questions thoughtfully and honestly, show a modicum of interest in the work we do, and we probably won't hold your delusions of grandeur against you.

**We're not rubes, nor do we view ourselves as failures.** You may have wondered why I bothered to say, "be pleasant and professional." In an interview situation, isn't everybody? You'd be surprised.

Personally, I'm always amazed at the way some candidates treat us. It's true that most of us who serve on search committees don't hold doctorates, because only in the last decade or so have community colleges begun going out of their way to hire Ph.D.'s. But that doesn't make us "rubes" (as a commenter on one of *The Chronicle'*s blogs once described us), and it doesn't mean we take kindly to being patronized by some pup with a shiny new doctorate who thinks he or she has all the answers.

Furthermore, while you may view "settling" for a community college as a failure, rest assured that we do not. However we ended up in the jobs we have now, we've probably grown to like them a great deal. We believe the work we do is important, and we think you'd be lucky to work here.

We certainly don't expect you to fawn over us, but a little humility and deference will go a long way.

**Our interviews move fast.** It's not unusual for a two-year college to spend two or three consecutive days interviewing 12 or more people in one-hour time blocks.

So don't expect to be one of four finalists, and don't expect the daylong red-carpet treatment: job talk, lunch with the dean, etc. Maybe if you're lucky your interview with us might last an hour and a half—assuming, of course, that you're invited to the campus at all. These days, more and more community colleges are conducting interviews via telephone or Skype. (But even on Skype, you likely will still be one of 12, and still get only an hour.)

In other words, by the time we get to you, we may have already seen or talked to several other people. We might very well be tired, if it's near the end of the day. Maybe a little bored. Perhaps more than a little annoyed, depending on who or what has come before you.

We will still do our best to remain attentive and give you every consideration. As professionals, we take pride in our work. We understand the importance of the faculty search process to our students and our institution. We're looking for colleagues who will be good teachers, who will shoulder their share of the work, who will not steal our Diet Cokes from the department refrigerator.

But you're going to have to make a strong impression, and you won't have a great deal of time in which to do it.

**We're pretty open-minded.** Our job announcements tend to be fairly specific documents, in terms of degree, years of experience, and other qualifications required. And yet, there's a good chance we may have fudged a little bit in inviting you for an interview, if we thought you were an excellent candidate but didn't quite meet some arbitrary standard. Obviously, there are areas in which we have no wiggle room at all, such as minimum degree requirements, which are determined by our accrediting body. But if you only have two years of full-time experience, for instance, and the ad calls for three, we might be able to argue that your part-time experience equates to an additional year.

That same open-mindedness tends to carry over into the interview. Sure, there may be a committee member who is dead set on only hiring people who believe exactly what he or she believes. But most of us are open to new ideas, different personality types, alternative ways of doing things. We want to be impressed by you, or we wouldn't have extended the invitation. So by all means, impress us.

**And yet we often face bureaucratic constraints.** As Allison Vaillancourt pointed out in her column, search committees don't actually do the hiring; they just make recommendations. If anything, that is even truer at community colleges, which tend to be a little more hierarchical and concerned with "chain of command" than four-year institutions.

If, as a search committee, we believe that you are the best person for the job, then we will make a compelling argument on your behalf to the administrator overseeing the search. If we do our job well, and the administrator in question does not have some other agenda, then chances are good that our argument will carry the day.

However, sometimes administrators do have other agendas—and sometimes those agendas might not even be apparent to the committee members. Sometimes other "political realities" supersede even the most compelling arguments about a particular candidate. That stinks, but it's the world we live in.

The bottom line is that, if you understand who we are and what we do, if you're well prepared for the interview, and if you perform well under fire, you have a good chance of getting the job. If you don't, it's not because you're deficient but just because the competition was so fierce or because there were other considerations of which you could not have been aware.

Try not to let that discourage you. If you're good enough to be invited for one interview, you're probably good enough to be invited for another. And the next one just might be the right fit.

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