Community Colleges Might Not Be for You

**Are you prepared to teach 5 classes a semester for the rest of your career?**

*By Rob Jenkins*OCTOBER 26, 2015

When I go around the country speaking about teaching careers at two-year colleges, people assume I must be out proselytizing — trying to entice some of the nation’s brightest graduate students to join the community-college faculty.

Not necessarily. Of course I’d like to build a deeper candidate pool for two-year colleges; that only benefits our institutions and, ultimately, our students. Plus, anyone who has read my columns on The Two-Year Track in *The Chronicle* for the past 12 years knows I’m a cheerleader for community colleges. I believe they serve a vital function and, on top of that, are pretty good places to work.

But the truth is: Teaching at a community college isn’t for everyone. Two-year schools have their own culture, their own way of looking at things, and their own set of customs and norms, which may be very different from what some people are accustomed to or even interested in.

There’s no shame in that. People’s preferences and priorities vary widely. Perhaps teaching at a community college would suit your personality and help you reach your professional goals — but perhaps not. And if you’re still trying to figure that out as we enter the fall application season, here are some signs that a community college teaching career might not be for you.

You don’t really like to teach. I use the word "really" here advisedly, not as a throw-away modifier. If you plan to become a community-college faculty member, you’d better *really*like to teach, because that’s what we do: We teach. A lot. A typical load for a full-time faculty member is five courses a semester, 10 for the year. Whenever I say that to a group of graduate students, jaws drop.

No doubt most people who pursue a faculty career do so because they like to teach. But not everyone does. Some are drawn to the profession because they’re extremely passionate about their field of study. Graduate school provides them the opportunity to completely immerse themselves in it, and they want a faculty position to be an extension of that.

Even for people who generally like to teach, five courses a semester may still seem like a lot. That’s because it is. But if you’re not prepared for that — if you can’t imagine yourself doing that for the next 30 years — then you probably shouldn’t even apply to community colleges.

Underprepared students annoy you. Most of us, when we’re young and imagining a faculty career, picture ourselves leading a stimulating discussion with a bunch of well-prepared high achievers. Anyone who has actually taught college courses, however, even at a selective university, knows that isn’t always the case. Some teachers are able to adjust to that reality, while others go around grousing about how poorly prepared their students are.

If you’re in the latter group, you should probably steer away from community colleges. While we have some very bright students — and thriving honors programs — statistically, most of our students are underprepared for college. And if we hire you, many of those students will be in your classes.

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That, in a nutshell, is the challenge of teaching at a two-year campus: You will have students who are relatively well-prepared for college sitting right next to students who under-achieved in high school. Grousing about that won’t help. You either have to figure out how to best serve both sets of students — along with those in the middle — or else don’t put yourself in that environment to begin with.

You’re looking for prestige. Along with picturing yourself teaching the best students, you might also have seen yourself working at a top institution — or at least one with an impressive-sounding name, preferably with the word "university" in there somewhere. "Flyover County Community College" just doesn’t have the same cachet.

That sort of prestige-mongering is certainly encouraged in graduate school. That’s why so many advisers actively steer their students away from community colleges, even when that sector of academe is providing most of the faculty openings.

If prestige matters to you, you probably won’t be happy at a community college. No one — not your graduate-school advisers, your former classmates, or even your parents — will be particularly impressed that you landed a job at FCCC. Only your new colleagues will care — and maybe your annoyingly underprepared students.

You dream of becoming a well-known scholar. There are some (relatively) famous college professors: Paul Krugman, Stanley Fish, Cornell West, Camille Paglia, Noam Chomsky, Michael Eric Dyson. And one thing they all have in common is that none of them teaches at a two-year college. Honestly, the only community-college professor anybody’s ever heard of is Jill Biden — and most people know her only as the vice president’s wife.

Of course, "fame" is relative. The people I just mentioned all have national reputations. But I have known a handful of community-college faculty members who became fairly well known in their discipline or in their local community, like the professor who wrote the definitive history of the small town where his college is located. Even such meager recognition is difficult to achieve, though, because so much of your day at a two-year campus is spent on teaching and service-related activities. Few of us have the time or resources to write books or articles or pursue an active research agenda. But some do, so it clearly isn’t impossible — just hard.

You hope to get rich. I’m being a bit facetious because, of course, it’s highly unlikely you’ll get rich at any level of academe, unless you become a football coach or a president at a major university. But even if we substitute "relatively affluent" for "rich," that still might be a stretch at a community college.

True, most two-year colleges offer competitive starting salaries — for their location, that is, and within the field of education. Generally speaking, you can live reasonably well on a community-college professor’s salary; and in a two-earner household, that same salary can help a family afford a decent home in a good school district.

That said, whereas full professors at research universities routinely earn six figures, few community college professors ever approach that mark (except perhaps in parts of the country where people making $100,000 a year still can’t afford to buy a house). Administrators at two-year colleges can make significantly more than faculty, but nowhere near the Gordon Gee range.

You think of it as a "starter job." One of the most common questions graduate students ask me — and one I wrote about in [a recent Vitae blog post](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1001-can-a-community-college-job-be-a-steppingstone) — is whether they can teach at a community college for a couple years and then "move up" to a four-year institution.

Well, that depends on what you mean by "move up." The idea that two-year colleges are inferior, by definition — such that a job at a four-year campus would necessarily be an improvement — is offensive to many community-college folks. For the most part, we like what we do and have no desire to go anywhere else.

That whole "publish or perish" thing? You can have it.

But the reality is that teaching at a community college — especially on the tenure track — marks you as more or less permanently unfit for a position at a four-year institution, in the eyes of many university professors and administrators. So not only is the "starter job" mind-set likely to be a nonstarter with a search committee but "moving up" is actually highly unlikely.

You need a back-up plan. What you *want* is a job at a research university, but what you*need* is a job. Any job. So why not include, along with all those university applications, a few community-college apps? You know — as a back-up plan.

Such reasoning is understandable, but it has two serious flaws. First, it assumes that a position at a two-year college is probably easier to get than one at a four-year campus. Not necessarily. In fact, if a community-college search committee sees any indication that we are your Plan B, that is perhaps the quickest way to sink your candidacy. And we probably will pick up on it — which is the second flaw in the "back-up plan" approach. Candidates often signal their intent in numerous ways, in both the application and the interview, and we aren’t stupid. We will pick up on your signals.

Now, if you’re very, very careful, you just might be able to fake your way through the entire process and land a full-time job. But even if you do, you won’t be happy, for all the reasons mentioned above.

Yes, I know the faculty job market is abysmal. I understand that job seekers do need to cast a wide net. But if you know you absolutely will not be content working at a community college for the rest of your life — teaching five classes every semester, never becoming rich or famous — then do yourself a favor and don’t even bother applying. Community colleges are simply not for you.

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