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# Tenure-Track Employment Opportunities at the Community College Level: A View from the Job Candidate's Perspective\*

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In professional development literature, few articles focus on career opportunities at the community college level. Thus as a recent Ph.D. having just completed my first year as a tenure-track instructor of political science at a two-year college, I was fascinated by Kent Brudney's (2001) article on academic careers at community colleges in the March 2001 issue of *PS*. Professor Brudney points out that an academic career as a community college faculty member differs in many ways from the type of career that is the focus of doctoral preparation. In political science and across academe, doctoral training is first and foremost about research. Those pursuing the Ph.D. are expected to become research scholars who will advance the state of knowledge in their disciplines. The institutional mission of the American community college, on the other hand, is teaching. Indeed, some have argued that a powerful emphasis on instructional innovation and student empowerment provides community colleges with an identity distinct from the nation's elite schools of higher education (see Olmstead 2001; Straw 2001). Given this institutional orientation, the hiring process and academic culture at community colleges vary considerably from

those at four-year colleges and universities.

This article provides additional information on community college tenure-track opportunities for job candidates in political science who might be considering expanding their searches to include posts at two-year colleges. I write from the perspective of the successful community college job-search candidate, and provide reflections and advice relating to three areas of the community college job search and teaching environment. In the first section I discuss my decision to seek a position at a two-year college and I address the dilemmas of professional self-image that may face new Ph.D.s considering community college employment. The second section recounts key strategies and practices that I found successful as a candidate on the community college market. In the final section I describe what I have learned during my first year as a community college instructor, focusing on the specific adaptations I have made in creating a classroom environment that is academically challenging for advanced students yet not rigidly inaccessible to students with limited basic skills (see Bundy 2000).

Overall, my first year teaching community college was overwhelmingly positive. I have developed as a professional in ways I did not anticipate as a graduate student. Nevertheless, the shift to community college teaching was frequently difficult, because although I consider research and publication important to my career, scholarly accomplishment is ranked extremely low on the list of community col-

lege faculty priorities. Thus with the overriding emphasis on instruction at two-year colleges, freshly minted Ph.D.s with primary aspirations to prestigious research careers should think carefully about the professional trade-offs of employment as a community college instructor.

## The Decision to Teach at Community College

I completed my Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California at Santa Barbara in December 1999. In the last few years of my graduate career, the academic marketplace and the level of competition for new tenure-track posts began to dominate discussions among the department's faculty and graduate students, and within the department I experienced firsthand changes in the job-search environment. I served as the department's graduate student representative to an international relations search in 1995 that attracted nearly 350 applicants (for a position open at any level). Moreover, as I neared completion of my dissertation, the department chair had added workshops on non-academic employment opportunities to the department's professional-skills colloquia program.

My perceptions of the academic marketplace influenced me to pursue a job-market strategy focused on completion of the degree, since having the Ph.D. in hand (in contrast to being ABD) was becoming recognized (at least statistically) as the most important factor in securing employment (Yin 1998, 819). My decision to apply aggressively for a community college job grew

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out of my strategy of degree completion. As a married grad student with a toddler, my plan was to complete the dissertation, do some conferencing, and have some manuscripts submitted for review by the time I started to mail applications. However, as time went by, my focus shifted mostly to completion of the dissertation, and by fall 1999 I was unpublished, had no manuscripts under review, with a proposal for a paper presentation at the APSA Annual Meeting rejected. After applying to over 30 American politics and international relations positions at schools ranging from small Midwestern liberal arts colleges to a number of state universities and research institutions, it became clear by the end of the year that I was not going to be contacted for interviews.

Fortunately, I had landed an interim appointment as a part-time lecturer beginning spring semester 2000 at the California State University, Fresno (my undergraduate institution). Early that January, as my prospects on the national market waned, I began applying for community college positions in California. I applied to a total of 16 tenure-track positions offered within 12 community college districts. I was invited for four interviews and made three campus visits. My second campus visit, at Long Beach City College, went well and resulted in a call-back for a second interview and ultimately a job offer as a tenure-track instructor.

Although I was elated to have secured tenure-track employment, the decision to enter the community college market in early 2000 was difficult, and such a decision is not likely to be an easy one for most doctoral graduates. A job candidate who has spent the better part of a decade preparing for a research career may not warm to the teaching duties and environment of the typical community college. And for those who do take the plunge into the community college job market, my experience suggests that personal dilemmas may arise involving one's self-image as a scholar rather than teacher, and over the likelihood, as a community college

instructor, of building a reputation in the discipline.

The problem of self-image stems from the basic nature of the community college mission, which differs substantially from the historic mission of research universities where doctoral recipients are trained. Two-year colleges are teaching institutions that serve a number of functions within the local community: university-transfer campuses for the traditional "college-bound" student; technical colleges providing a variety of vocational and certification programs; and community centers providing lifelong educational opportunities for non-traditional students and retirees. As well, community colleges are generally regarded as "second-chance" institutions, providing educational opportunities for individuals whose personal experiences have diverged from the classic "life-span model" of personal development and success (Griffith and Connor 1994). The community college mission is a vital one in the American democracy. Many faculty members prefer to teach at this level because, fundamentally, education is the driving force in the provision of equality of opportunity in the United States.

However, the American system of colleges and universities represents a prestige hierarchy (Heiberger and Vick 1992, 7) in which community colleges fill the lowest rank, often barely recognized as part of the larger structure. The authors of a recent book on community college teaching note, "When Americans celebrate the quality of higher education, they are usually thinking about the Harvards and Stanfords and Berkeleys, not about community colleges. When they insist on providing access to post-secondary education, they focus on grants and loans that benefit students in four-year colleges and proprietary schools, not community colleges" (Grubb et al. 1999, 7-8).

Thus two-year colleges—with their traditional mission of open access and their position at bottom of the country's system of higher education—impart an image of faculty roles that varies considerably from the image of faculty cultivated at

research institutions. Those seeking placement at the community college level will be well served by a personal outlook commensurate with the mission of the associate-degree institution. For example, a job candidate who has taught at or attended a two-year college is likely to understand the value of the community college's open access orientation. My own educational experience, for instance, was one of working my way up through California's master plan for higher education. I transferred from Costa Mesa's Orange Coast College to enter the bachelor's program in political science at CSU Fresno. My eventual goal was a graduate degree, and I was accepted to the University of California and went on to earn my doctorate. Thus as a new Ph.D. entering the job market in 1999, I had openly considered positions at the community college level among the number of possibilities for tenure-track employment.

But the actual reality of competing for a community college job was somewhat eye opening. Graduate school is generally not geared to training community college instructors, and doctoral job candidates will usually not be encouraged to teach at the associate-degree level. Candidates on the community college market will be advised by some of their mentoring professors to avoid community college posts and to "hold out" for more prestigious positions. My dissertation advisor was very supportive of my decision to accept a community college post, but the response was less enthusiastic among some of my other faculty mentors.

University faculty members tend to hold unfavorable attitudes toward community college placement, especially in terms of the teaching load, inability to conduct research, and the quality of students. Plus, doctoral departments obviously want to place their own job candidates in top schools, which confers recognition on their programs and bolsters departmental rankings. These are factors that job candidates should consider when contemplating the community college job market. Holders of the doctorate are viewed

as among the country's intellectual elite. Those who take positions at two-year colleges in effect forfeit some of the institutional foundations of that status. Thus, in weighing the pros and cons of an academic career at a community college, candidates may face dilemmas about their potential for professional development at this level and the opportunity to make a contribution to political science.

Nevertheless, community colleges offer attractive tenure-track opportunities, especially for job candidates who enjoy teaching. Most importantly, if one is set on an academic career, having a full-time, tenure-track job teaching introductory political science easily beats having a non-academic or a less prestigious post-doctoral position. The teaching environment on many two-year campuses is surprisingly scholarly. My institution, Long Beach City College, feels in many ways like a classic liberal arts college. It is a large school with an enrollment of 28,000 full- and part-time students. In the classroom, faculty members have complete autonomy over the selection of textbooks and pedagogical methods. The college also has a reputation for transferring a high proportion of students to the California State University, Long Beach. Moreover, my department combines the fields of history and political science, and of the department's 14 faculty members, eight hold a Ph.D. and one is continuing her graduate education in pursuit of the doctorate. Nearly all members of the department publish or participate at professional conferences. Best of all, the work environment is collegial and I developed early on a support network among other instructors at the college.

Furthermore, despite the stereotypes, community colleges can provide considerable opportunity for research and publication (see Lord 1986). Most community colleges have faculty professional development programs that, while geared for teaching, usually include financial support for conference participation and sabbaticals. Plus, I have found that while the teaching load

of five classes is heavy, my preparations are for multiple sections of one or two courses (leaving time for scholarly reading and reflection), and I expect the time spent on course preparation to decline in the years ahead as I settle into my position. Finally, community college libraries, while certainly not geared to high-powered research, are likely to have valuable interlibrary loan programs and will tend to have subscriptions to most of the major national newspapers and important periodicals like *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Economist*, and *Foreign Affairs*. For good measure, I also make regular research trips to the nearby library of the University of California at Irvine, which has the full complement of top journals in political science (see Durfee 1999). So overall, after making the transition from a major research university, community college employment has proved to be rewarding for me and I would encourage job candidates who enjoy teaching to consider applying for community college posts.

### **Strategies for the Job Search and Campus Interview Process**

Community college job searches exhibit both similarities and differences to national job searches in political science. First off, candidates should be aware of the intense competition surrounding community college faculty openings. For California community colleges during the 1999–2000 placement cycle, the number of applicants for open positions was in the 150–200 range.<sup>1</sup> The competition nationally for community college posts is just as keen (see Bremen 2001), making this aspect of the job market quite similar to the job search process at the big colleges and research institutions (Carter and Scott 1998).

However, there is a significant difference in the type of preparation required to be competitive on the community college market. I learned the hard way after my first campus visit and interview at Merced College in early March. When one member of the hiring committee asked me “What innovative teaching

methods do you use in the classroom?” I was unable to offer a satisfactory response, and I had a strong (and ultimately correct) hunch that I was not going to be offered the job. Although that candidacy was unsuccessful, it proved to be a tremendous learning experience that paid off handsomely when I was called for a second interview a week or so later.

Most importantly, the battery of questions at my Merced interview forced me to conduct a round of research into pedagogy. This was an enlightening endeavor, as I researched areas of teaching and learning to which I had not been introduced during graduate training. Central here was a range of issues dealing with “student-centered instruction.” As it turned out, this research showed that, for at least a decade, college teaching had been a moving away from the traditional lecture toward more interactive, learner-centered instructional methods. The classic touchstone article on this topic is Barr and Tagg's (1995) piece that elaborates a new instructional “learning paradigm” that envisions students as responsible for their own learning and incorporates improvements in the quality of instruction at the aggregate, institutional level as a central objective of the teaching mission (see also Grubb et al. 1999). Reading this literature was extremely important. Many of the community college job announcements I received contained detailed job descriptions with an overwhelming stress on innovative teaching methods and the development of varied pedagogical techniques. Thus, doctoral job candidates on the community college market would be wise to pay attention to issues of pedagogy as they begin their job searches.

Second, understanding the traditional mission of community colleges and the nature of the student population at the associate-degree level is important. Community colleges are institutions of higher education operating with open-door policies. Students in general need only be 18 years of age to attend classes, and many students have not

graduated from high school and some possess only limited academic skills. For example, in placement testing for the Fall 2000 class at Long Beach City College, just 33% of students met the reading proficiency level for conferral of the associate degree. Similar low levels of basic skills were found in English and mathematics, and the level of preparation found at my institution is consistent with national trends in community college teaching (see Arnold 2000). For doctoral graduates coming from selective colleges (as either an instructor or a student), the challenges of teaching transfer-oriented, university-level academics at community colleges will be significant. Of course, the teaching experience of candidates will be of special importance to hiring committees. Candidates who have taught at a community college are generally viewed favorably, although such experience is not a prerequisite for employment. I was an adjunct faculty lecturer at the California State University at the time of my Long Beach interview, and during my call-back interview with the vice president for academic affairs the following week, I made compelling comparisons between the students I was teaching at the state university level (who also have remedial issues) with the student population at community colleges.

Third, for community college positions, the interview stage will be similar to interviews at four-year colleges or universities: The interview is the opportunity for both the hiring committee and the job candidate to assess their compatibility (Heiberger and Vick 1992). The job candidate should look sharp. Clean and pressed business attire is recommended, as is good grooming. The interview will last about 45 minutes to an hour and will consist of a preselected series of questions on qualifications and experience that are asked of all candidates for the position. Depending on the background and training of the committee, some additional questions might focus on the candidate's knowledge of the political science literature or the main textbooks planned for adoption.

The main difference between an interview at the community college level and that of other institutions is the job talk. Instead of a research presentation, community colleges ask candidates to perform a teaching demonstration on a pre-announced topic. I was asked to give demonstrations on the origins of the Cold War (Merced) and on the electoral college system (Long Beach). In both of these teaching demonstrations I delivered a tried-and-true, no-nonsense lecture presentation (since, frankly, I was not comfortable trying another approach). During my demonstration at Long Beach, I used overhead transparencies to display a brief lecture outline and a diagram on the role of the electoral college in the U.S. system of indirect elections and the prevention of majority tyranny. Although straightforward and brief, I felt confident and comfortable and was able to connect with the committee with a display of appropriate humor (and having practiced with mock teaching demonstrations beforehand helped).

Of course, the precise format of a teaching demonstration will vary from school to school. My experience was the lecture format with an audience of faculty members, and in all of my interviews I was offered a podium, white-board, and overhead projectors or other visual aids. A friend of mine in political science from UC Santa Barbara who was a successful candidate on the community college market during the 2000–2001 cycle was asked to give a PowerPoint demonstration for one interview and was asked to teach an actual class for another. It is also not unusual in some cases for a committee to pose as “your class,” hoping to elicit an innovative or unconventional method of instruction (basically a demonstration of teaching beyond the traditional lecture).

The teaching demonstration is the most important part of the interview. It is perhaps also the least fair to the candidate, I think, since it is almost impossible to determine how well one teaches in a 10- to 15-minute observation. In the end, a confident presentation by the candidate, illustrating mastery of the

subject material and command of visuals or instructional technology, should be enough to demonstrate to the committee the applicant's teaching abilities.

Finally, the hiring process at community colleges consists of the same capricious decision-making and practices found on the national job market (see Drezner 1998). For any academic job search, the exact reason why one candidate gets an interview while another does not is hard to pin down. The variety of abilities, interests, and personalities that both the candidates and the committees bring to the process is unlimited. Fine distinctions among candidates in qualifications or presentation may make or break a candidacy. Since having the terminal degree is not necessary for hiring (only a master's is required for community college teaching) will having the Ph.D. help or hinder one's application?

From my experience with a successful search, I learned that the key factors in my candidacy were the quality of my faculty recommendations and my demonstrated commitment to teaching. Also very important was my appearance of collegiality. Candidates should learn as much as they can about the mission of the community colleges to which they are invited. Having specific knowledge about a college and department (in my case gleaned from the college's web page) is invaluable in imparting a sense of interest in the institution. In addition, one should appear relaxed, cordial, and interested in the background and teaching of the committee members (as well as opportunities for professional development). These points come through most forcefully at the end of the interview, when the committee members may ask if the candidate has questions for them. Finally, in preparation for this phase of the job search, I was fortunate to have read Mary Morris Heiberger and Julia Miller Vick's *The Academic Job Search Handbook* (1992) and (I am not kidding) Steven Graber's *The Everything Get-A-Job Book* (2000), both of which I cannot recommend

enough for candidates in job searches at any level of academe.

## **Making the Transition to Community College Teaching and Learning**

Because community college instruction entails heavy teaching loads (say, five or more sections of American Government), a student population of a widely different abilities and aspirations, and a level of intimacy not generally found in the large university lecture hall setting, teaching at the two-year level is both intensive and intellectually stimulating. In my development as an instructor over the last year I have adapted to my new teaching environment by making basic changes in my approach to instruction and by expanding support resources available to students. These adaptations have included a reevaluation of course content, increased attention to pedagogy, and the development of supplemental instructional materials designed to augment traditional texts and study guides and facilitate student learning and the development of basic skills.

### **Reevaluation of Course Content**

In my transition to community college teaching I have been careful to structure my courses for a student body (generally) unaccustomed to serious and sustained academic work. Most importantly, in my American Government course I have used my syllabus as a vehicle for communicating high and consistent standards of academic excellence. After two semesters of full-time teaching, my syllabus has developed into a nine-page masterpiece, touching on issues of teaching philosophy, time management, classroom decorum, and academic support that I rarely encountered as an undergraduate or as a teaching assistant in grad school. I consider the syllabus not only a rigorous document outlining the course objectives and seriousness of purpose, but also an appealing invitation to the intellectual rewards of learning political science. An emphasis on rigor is

also seen in the selection of the course textbook, George C. Edwards et al.'s *Government in America* (2002). The book is advanced for many students, but the text's relative degree of difficulty is balanced by an examination regime of frequent tests using both objective and subjective assessment measures (the latter using a short-answer essay format), my disregard of students' lowest examination scores, and a limited examination retest option. Finally, on the writing requirement I assign a news analysis journal in which students write brief but formal one-to-two page essays. This assignment is very different from universities' traditional research paper project of 10-to-12 pages. Shorter one-to-two page assignments are simply more appropriate for the writing abilities of the typical community college student.

### **Issues of Pedagogy**

Prior to my experience as a community college candidate and instructor, I had not thought a great deal about issues of pedagogy. My introduction to teaching and learning was limited to the standard first-year orientations and seminars for teaching assistants. I had never read a book on pedagogy as a graduate student (small mystery there), and the techniques and practices I employed in the classroom were derived from my teaching-assistant experience and from the examples of teaching provided by my doctoral department's full-time faculty. In retrospect, graduate students (at least in my program) were offered a sustained and balanced opportunity to develop their teaching, which included in my case two stints as an independent lecturer. Now, however, I read widely in teaching and learning literature and have consciously employed in my American Government courses a "whole class" teaching methodology using extensive lecture outlining, a relaxed pace, and frequent repetition of key terms, concepts, and theories. Plus, I augment the lecture format with a number of alternative delivery techniques including video presentations, textual

exegesis, and student-centered learning activities (my favorite is an in-class ideological questionnaire). Throughout, the overriding goal is to create an engaging classroom environment combined with a demonstrated concern for the improvement of student comprehension. Additionally, in my fall World Politics course, a major component of the class involves the use of the interactive "case study" teaching methodology I learned at the New International Studies Classroom Symposium at the University of Southern California in October 2000. Based on over a decade of experience on case teaching by professors John Boehr (University of Washington) and Lou Ortmyer (Davidson College), the case study method has been spreading across the subfields of American public policy, comparative politics, and international relations and is gaining recognition as among the most effective new pedagogies (Foran 2001). With a year of community college instruction under my belt, my excursions in pedagogy have enlivened my teaching, improved my courses (from my own perspective and indicated by student evaluations), and have been some of the most rewarding aspects of my professional development.

### **The Development of Supplemental Instructional Materials**

Another exciting area in my transition to community college teaching is the development of supplementary instructional materials for my courses. This focus revolves primarily around (1) the gathering and distribution of a collection of course handouts on improving academic skills and (2) the creation of an interactive web page for my introductory American politics class. During the semester I frequently distribute handouts on basic learning skills. The handouts form the basis for a set of "pre-lectures" I deliver as a way to build classroom dialogue on the improvement of note taking, reading techniques, test-taking strategies, and student motivation. Additionally, I have developed an active-learning course web page in

partnership with Long Beach City College's instructional multimedia design team: <www3.lbcc.cc.ca.us/coursepages/polsc1dkd>. Using the college's online courseware, I created a series of interactive online multiple-choice practice tests that provide students feedback as to whether and why an answer is correct or incorrect. The online practices are popular with students, and my site also contains printable study guides, vocabulary lists, and course syllabi. Developing both the hand-out collection and web site was time consuming, but I am pleased to have created valuable tools to foster teaching and learning in my American Government courses.

## Conclusion

Given the relentless tightening of the academic job market in recent years, it would be unsurprising if an

increasing number of political science job search candidates looked to community college positions for potential career opportunities. From my own perspective, teaching at the associate-degree level has been both challenging and rewarding. Competing successfully for an open academic post at a community college was in itself a powerful validation of years of hard work in scholarship and teaching. Additionally, working full-time this past year has allowed me to improve my teaching and learn more about good classroom practices. Nevertheless, the transition to community college teaching is likely to be a big step down for job candidates oriented toward prestigious research careers, and candidates should think carefully about choosing the community college option. Not only is research and publication discounted at two-year colleges, there is also little

opportunity to work with senior faculty engaged in ongoing research. Similarly, few students at this level are declared political science majors, so it is difficult to fulfill mentoring aspirations and recruit new political scientists into the field. Still, teaching introductory political science at a community college may offer new Ph.D.s a stimulating instructional experience unlikely to be had at a large university. And no matter where one finds employment (at a small college, a state university, or a major research institution), the need to stay active in the field and develop professionally will always be present. So bearing in mind the potential and problematic dilemmas of professional self-image, teaching-oriented job candidates familiar with the horror stories of the academic marketplace may find attractive opportunities and rewarding careers at community colleges.

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## Notes

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1. Jill Leovy, "A College Crowd," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 August 2000, sec. B.

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