Considering Community Colleges: Advice to Graduate Students and Job Seekers

MLA COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY COLLEGES

As THE Final Report of the MLA Committee on Professional Employment pointed out, "In the United States over 90% of English programs and most likely between one-half and two-thirds of the total number of professorial-rank appointments are located outside doctorate-granting institutions" (23). Current statistics compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics also reveal that more than 50% of all United States undergraduates are enrolled in community colleges (Phillippe 15); about half of all undergraduates will take their only college-level studies in language and literature at a community college. Clearly, the community college represents an increasingly important site of college-level job opportunity in English and foreign languages.

Since the greatest growth period in the development of new community colleges took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many of these institutions are losing large numbers of their faculty to retirement at the beginning of this century. These retirements are expected to create additional hiring opportunities in two-year institutions for several years. Thus, the community college may be the institution of greatest potential for career development in higher education at the current time.

Under the current system of graduate education, however, not all students who complete their doctorates are well prepared for teaching in community colleges. As *The MLA Guide to the Job Search* notes, "The diversity of the higher education system and the very small proportion of PhD-granting departments within that system mean that impressions about the profession and the work of being a professor formed solely on the basis of personal experience in a PhD-granting department are unfortunately liable to be misleading" (Showalter et al. 55; see 16–56). Job seekers need a clear understanding of the learning environment in the two-year segment of higher education. Therefore, we provide the following information and suggestions

for potential candidates in the community college job market in languages and literature.

The Mission of Community Colleges and Characteristics of Their Students

America's community colleges are the largest and most diverse segment of higher education. The mission of a comprehensive community college is grounded in the commitment to give the opportunity to pursue higher education to all citizens who believe they can benefit from it. Community colleges maintain an open-door admissions policy to most programs and offer a variety of programs to meet the needs of a diverse and nontraditional student population. Individual college mission statements generally indicate dedication to a broad variety of goals, including university-parallel academic programs; technical education; paraprofessional degrees and certificates in collaboration with business, industry, and medicine; continuing education for lifelong learning; remedial and developmental programs; and opportunities for personal growth and development.

As the term *community* emphasizes, community colleges serve their regions not only by means of formal credit and noncredit academic programs but also with an array of community services aimed at aiding the local population of the college and providing cultural programming that makes the college a cultural center and resource.

Community colleges are well described as the most democratic enterprise in higher education, because they offer educational opportunity to anyone who wants to succeed, regardless of race, gender, age, economic circumstances, or previous learning experiences.

Student populations in two-year institutions are extremely varied. The age range in a single class may

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be from sixteen (a high school enrollee) to eighty-six (a senior citizen enrollee). Prior educational experience may have a wide range; one student may be a high school dropout, another may hold a PhD or professional degree. Hours that students expect to work at their jobs may range from none to forty or more per week. Student goals may range from acquiring literary analysis skills for graduate school to acquiring practical survival skills for personal travel. Personal situations may fit at all points on a scale from "academically possessed" to "taking this course to get out of the house and away from the kids."

Community colleges themselves are diverse, responding to the needs, requirements, and opportunities for education in their own geographic areas. An average student population, however, might have the following characteristics:

Working at least part-time	65%
First-generation college student	65%
Female	60%
Minority	35%
Married	35%
Age over thirty	35%

The diversity of students enrolled in community colleges requires faculty members to be creative, innovative, and flexible in designing learning materials and techniques that will motivate students and move them toward their educational goals.

Teaching Opportunities and Experiences in Community Colleges

The primary teaching responsibilities in an English department at a community college will most likely be introductory composition and literature classes, plus the possibility of developmental-remedial sections. In a department of foreign languages, the most common teaching assignment includes an assortment of the first four semesters of language acquisition, with more firstyear sections than second-year sections. The teaching load may be composed of a combination of classroom instruction and distance learning. Courses may be at the remedial, regular, or honors level. Specific sections may be taught by an individual or a team. Classes may be assigned on campus, in area high schools, in the offices of local businesses, or anywhere in the world. Semester lengths may vary from three to sixteen weeks. Classes may be scheduled for mornings, evenings, or

weekends in blocks of time ranging from fifty minutes to six hours. They may be available to students on either a credit or noncredit basis.

As you consider a position in a particular community college, you should research the full range of course offerings in the department as well as how these courses are assigned. You will also want to know the process by which new courses and programs are developed, approved, and offered. Look for places in the curriculum where your strengths would be of special value to the department, with both its present and possible offerings.

Reasons to Teach in a Community College

Enthusiasm for Teaching

You should consider teaching in a community college if you love to teach, if you are interested in the teaching and learning process, and if intellectual interactions with different individuals and groups are a rewarding experience for you. As Ellen Olmstead writes, "If you don't want to teach, working at a community college is pure torture. You can't get away from students. The ambiance is intimate: one-onone, one by one." But, she continues, if teaching for you is a labor of love, then "if you were to teach at a community college, I guarantee that you would amass unanticipated delights as varied and numerous as the names of the students on your class roster."

Instructional assignments are greater at a community college than in most other institutions of higher education, usually fifteen hours per semester. As a professor at a community college, you will be evaluated primarily in terms of your effectiveness as a teacher, your commitment to student learning, and your service to the institution and the community. While research and publication are generally encouraged and supported, they do not serve as the main institutional goals and therefore may be given limited recognition and reward in terms of rank, promotion, and salary. Most institutional honors and awards are based on exemplary teaching.

Enthusiasm for Teaching Language and Composition

You should consider teaching in a community college if you are enthusiastic about teaching composition or language courses and introductory literature courses rather than advanced literary studies or re-

search. A community college foreign language instructor can expect to be teaching primarily first- and second-year language courses; small departments may also require you to be qualified to teach beginning courses in an additional language. An instructor in English can expect to be teaching primarily courses in reading and composition, with some opportunity to teach introductory literature courses.

Depending on the community college and on your ability to create courses and generate student enrollment, you may find opportunities to teach moreadvanced or more-specialized courses in literature or humanities, to create and direct travel study courses, to collaborate with colleagues in other departments on interdisciplinary courses, to provide summer workshops for area teachers, to develop and offer distance learning courses at multiple levels, and to discover other ways to extend your professional life in the context of the two-year institution. However, your primary responsibility will be to teach language and composition.

Preference for a Secure, Self-Defining Academic Job

The multiple missions of a comprehensive community college and the diversity of its student population offer opportunities for you to diversify your portfolio as an academic. You can teach interdisciplinary courses, team teach, and participate in learning communities. You can gravitate to developmental education, honors programs, or adult education. You can work with international education, travel studies, or distance learning. At a community college you generally have more freedom to construct your promotion and tenure exhibit profile because it will be less dependent on the "publish or perish" criterion of universities.

Although some community colleges do not have a tenure system, full-time community college professors who are earnest and dedicated are likely to have at least as much security in their jobs as colleagues in four-year institutions.

Applying for a Position in a Community College

Application

Start preparing for application before you enter the job market. Due to differences in mission and student populations, graduate school teaching assistantships are often not sufficient preparation for teaching in a

two-year college. If at all possible, gain some experience at a community college, preferably by teaching as an adjunct. You can also take courses on adult learning; work in adult literacy or language programs in order to encounter greater diversity in age, ethnicity, and ability among students; or work in a community college as a reader, teaching assistant, tutor, or aide to become better acquainted with the student population. Volunteer, if necessary.

In addition to checking announcements in the MLA's Job Information List, look for open positions in community colleges in the Chronicle of Higher Education and in local newspapers in the region that interests you. Job announcements and job offers generally occur later in the academic year in community colleges than in four-year schools, due to differences in budget cycles. The most reasonable source of up-todate job market opportunities is through the Internet as more and more institutions are providing full employment information, including application forms, on their Web sites. Many states have system-wide Web sites with job postings for all community colleges in the state.

Submit a letter of application with your application form. In this letter, follow the instructions on the job announcement carefully, specifically addressing the concerns found there. Focus on your teaching experience rather than your research. Include research information if it pertains directly to the first two years of college work (e.g., in developmental writing, composition, second language acquisition, or distance learning). In general, define your successes in terms of student success.

For advice specific to community colleges, read the sections "Preparing to Apply for Positions," "Preparing the Vita and Letter of Application," and "Interviews" in The MLA Guide to the Job Search (Showalter et al. 53-55).

Interview

Most community colleges do not conduct interviews at the MLA Annual Convention. Many do screening interviews by telephone (for advice on telephone interviews, see ADE and ADFL Online Job Counseling at $www.mla.org/Job_counseling/counseling_home.htm).$ If you are in the final group of candidates for a position, you can expect the interviews to be on campus. Since few community colleges reimburse expenses for candidates to travel for job interviews, try to organize your travel schedule to accommodate interviews at several neighboring institutions during one trip. If possible,

allow sufficient time to visit each college, including its bookstore and the language acquisition center or writing center, in order to become more familiar with the local culture.

In an interview for a job at a community college, present yourself above all as a dedicated, enthusiastic and—ideally—experienced classroom teacher. Have a vision for what might be your unique contributions to the intellectual life of your students and how you might implement them. This approach is significantly enhanced by being well informed in advance about the institution and the department to which you are applying. Visit the college's Web site for information and be sure to study its catalog.

The search committee is often composed of several members of the hiring department; it may also have faculty members from other disciplines. Try not to be intimidated by a large group. Interviews are usually based on a list of questions asked of all candidates. This structure is an attempt to provide the same opportunity to all candidates to discuss the same issues and ideas. The questions will focus on teaching and learning, and you will most likely be asked specifically about your experience with technology in instruction. Collegiality is also an important consideration.

Teaching Demonstration

You may be asked to teach a demonstration class, either with students in a classroom or with a group of faculty members from the department. Choose an approach that underscores your area of passion and expertise and that affords you the opportunity to demonstrate, in an efficient and creative manner, both interesting content and a variety of ways to convey the material.

Be sure that you understand the concept of the learner-centered classroom and apply its principles in your demonstration. If teaching to faculty members, ask whether the committee prefers that you teach exactly as you would to a regular class. Be creative, but be yourself. Play up your strong points, whatever they may be. Try to avoid the appearance of being nervous. Steer discussions in the direction of your strengths and passions. Give the committee something specific to remember you by.

Faculty Development Opportunities

Many community colleges pay special attention to the continuing professional development of their faculty members. Some have formal annual documentation of each professor's professional goals and progress toward these goals.

You can reasonably expect to find opportunities, often at your own campus, to attend sessions on such topics as student diversity, learning styles, use of technology, service learning, motivation, and time management. You should inquire about local policies on attending and presenting sessions at professional conferences and at other institutions, but ask these questions in the context of staying current and continuing to develop expertise in your field.

Working Conditions

A large percentage of faculty members in community colleges are hired as adjunct instructors. (A fairly typical balance is 60% full-time faculty members, 40% adjunct faculty members.) However, since this discussion is directed to those interested in full-time employment, the comments here on working conditions relate primarily to full-time status.

It is not possible to generalize about working conditions at a community college, precisely because these institutions are driven by regional local realities: they may be Native American tribal colleges, remote rural colleges, or colleges in the center of large cities. Because community colleges are locally controlled, the culture at a given institution can fall anywhere along the spectrum of possibility. You will want to inquire about the working conditions of the specific college with which you are negotiating. For a useful summary of what to consider, see "Investigating the Institutions" in *The MLA Guide to the Job Search* (Showalter et al. 51–53).

Despite the tremendous range and diversity of community colleges, the following attributes tend to be typical of most of them:

- a teaching load of twelve to fifteen hours a semester
- a teaching assignment weighted to composition or language courses rather than to specialized literature courses
- a stepped, collective pay scale rather than individually negotiated salaries
- a renewable contract system (although many community colleges have retained a tenure system)
- a reasonable expectation of job security, with faculty evaluation based primarily on teaching and on service to the institution

 a campus culture inclined more to college-wide or system-wide administrative lines of authority than to horizontal faculty governance grounded in departments of disciplines

A list of possible institutional characteristics does not tell the whole story of the satisfactions and the security that are achievable in a community college job. Many community college professors pursue successful and acclaimed academic careers, not only in their own institutions but also in the profession at large. In addition, for people who love to teach, the satisfaction of leading large numbers of diverse students toward academic goals is a great reward.

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