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It's a Viable Career Path

By Rob Jenkins

Imagine, if you can, a profession in which secure, full-time positions are more and more scarce. Then imagine a career coach in that field who chooses to disregard almost half of the available jobs.

That's precisely what's going on at many of our top research universities. I'm constantly getting e-mails from graduate students saying that they're interested in teaching at a community college but that their advisers—essentially, their career coaches—either don't know anything about the subject, refuse even to discuss it as a possibility, or both. The students are contacting me to try to get some answers.

Finding a full-time teaching job at a community college is not necessarily any easier than finding one at a four-year university. And a community-college career is not for everyone. But when you consider that two-year colleges enroll nearly half of all American undergraduates and, correspondingly, offer nearly half of the available full-time teaching positions, does it make any sense to ignore that job market altogether?

Not to me.

Some professors at research universities will never look kindly on a community-college career for their Ph.D.'s. Others have no such objections but simply don't have good advice to give on that front. If more professors at doctoral programs understood the nature of community-college careers, they would have better advice and be more open to offering it. So instead of focusing this month's column on graduate students, I'm directing this one at their advisers, to explain what they should know about working at a community college.

It's not a professional death sentence. Based on what I'm

hearing from graduate students, and from what I've picked up in conversations with my four-year counterparts, some advisers seem to regard teaching at a community college as a miserable fate for a Ph.D.

Perhaps that's because they can't imagine teaching five courses each semester, or teaching exclusively freshmen and sophomores, or working in an environment where there's little time, much less concrete support, for research. And it's true: Those things are characteristic of community colleges.

But what those advisers fail to recognize is that not everyone is like them. Some Ph.D.'s actually prefer the classroom to the laboratory or the library. Some love teaching first-year composition, introductory biology, or sophomore-level survey courses.

That doesn't mark those Ph.D.'s as failures, any more than high-school teachers are failures because they didn't decide to teach in higher education, or people with Ph.D.'s who work in museums or nonprofits are failures because they abandoned the ivory tower. I'd like to think that, as professionals and as human beings, we've moved beyond those kinds of petty biases, especially in the face of a deepening job crisis in academe.

It's a viable career path. Last fall, after I gave a talk on the community-college job search at a top-tier university, a faculty member came up to me to say how much she'd enjoyed the presentation. Then she added, with barely concealed surprise, "This is actually a viable career path."

Yes, it is. As Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa so graphically illustrated in *Academically Adrift*, good undergraduate teaching has never been more important. And with recent studies showing that nearly half of all American students who earned bachelor's degrees attended two-year colleges at some point, the key role that community colleges play in educating tomorrow's business leaders and professionals has become abundantly clear.

Of course, faculty members at community colleges aren't "just" teachers. We pursue scholarship, present at conferences, publish—although not to the extent that we might in a job at a research university. Many of us have also become deeply involved in the scholarship of teaching or educational technology. Much of what

academe has learned in the past few decades about college-level pedagogy, classroom computing, and online learning it owes to the research and innovations of community-college professors.

So it's a different career path from that of a researcher. But it can be just as viable, just as rewarding, and just as important to the profession as doing research in a particular academic subfield.

It's a destination, not a pit stop. Sometimes graduate students tell me that their advisers, faced with the realities of the tenure-track market, have decided "it's OK" for them to teach at a community college for a few years—so long as they move on as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, that's not very realistic advice.

I've worked in the community-college sector for 26 years, at five institutions in four states, as both a faculty member and a midlevel administrator. I can count on one hand the number of people I know personally who have left a two-year college for a tenure-track job at a four-year campus. And of those, only one has moved on to a research university. The others all went to small liberal-arts colleges, which—like community colleges—tend to have teaching missions.

Community colleges are not places where Ph.D.'s "pass through" in order to gain a little experience as a full-time faculty member before "moving up." They're places where full-time faculty members tend to stay and build lifelong careers. Anyone considering applying at a community college should take that into account.

Most of us really like it here. One reason faculty members at community colleges rarely leave may be that we get pigeonholed as "two-year folks." But the main reason, I think, is that most of us who teach full-time at a community college really like it.

I've never worked at a research university, except as a graduate student, but based on what I hear and read, the community-college environment appears to be far less stressful. There's no pressure to publish or perish. Earning tenure (if that's an option) is relatively straightforward at a two-year college: Do a good job for three to five years in teaching, service (mostly committee work), and professional development (such as attending conferences and

workshops, and occasionally presenting), and you're tenured.

For many professionals, community colleges also offer a better work-life balance. Take a young female professor in the sciences with two small children at home. At a research university, she might spend 70 to 80 hours a week in the lab for seven years or more, trying to get tenure. At a community college, she will almost certainly have a great deal more time to spend with her family. Not everyone would consider that an acceptable trade-off, but many would.

The pay at community colleges isn't bad, either. In fact, starting salaries are comparable to those at regional universities, although they may level out a little earlier and a little lower. And faculty members at two-year colleges typically enjoy the same health-care and other benefits offered to all state employees.

Specific degree and credit hours matter. A couple of years ago, I talked with a group of graduate students who were stunned to learn that their cross-disciplinary doctoral degrees probably wouldn't qualify them to teach anything at the two-year level. Their adviser was stunned, too. How could they have Ph.D.'s and not be qualified to teach at a community college?

The key lies in understanding the minimum qualifications for a community-college teaching position, and also in understanding what it is that we teach.

Most accrediting agencies across the country stipulate that, in order to teach freshman- and sophomore-level courses, a faculty member should have at least a master's degree with 18 graduate credit hours in the teaching field. Someone with a master's in English, for example, will easily have far more than 18 hours in that field. But someone with a master's in English education might have only 12 or 15 hours' worth of English courses, with the rest in education. In the second instance, the student would probably need to go back and pick up another graduate course or two before he or she could teach English at most community colleges.

Remember, too, that community colleges don't usually offer something like comparative literature. We teach French, English, and Spanish. A candidate with a degree in comparative literature might have taken several courses in each of those languages but not

have 18 hours in any one of them. A similar dynamic would probably apply to other cross-disciplinary degrees (an M.B.A., for example).

I'm not suggesting that advisers discourage students from pursuing cross-disciplinary degrees. I'm saying that, if a student has an interest in teaching at a community college, advisers should make sure that student has enough graduate credit hours to teach at least one subject that community colleges actually offer.

Teaching experience is vital. When we evaluate candidates for full-time faculty positions, one of our most important criteria is teaching experience. In fact, once we've determined that candidates meet the minimum academic requirements, experience becomes the No. 1 factor.

Unfortunately, graduate students are constantly telling me how they have to fight to get any significant teaching experience. Some of their advisers don't want them to teach, fearing that it might interfere with their research or delay graduation. Some programs don't allow graduate students—even those with master's degrees—to be listed as a "teacher of record," which is key to gaining experience that can be included on a CV. In some fields, grant agencies discourage or even prohibit students from teaching at all.

For students who want to work at a community college, or who are at least considering it, such restrictions are extremely problematic. Supportive advisers can make a big difference by advocating for them, working within the department to create more teaching opportunities, and perhaps even turning a blind eye when they bend the rules and take on outside employment, maybe at a local community college, in order to burnish their classroom credentials.

Without that experience, they're probably not going to land a community-college job. And if they have problems getting hired by four-year colleges, too—as the majority of new Ph.D.'s do these days—well, that doesn't do much for the old placement statistics, either.

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As a full-time faculty member (and a PhD) who has worked at one community college for over 25 years, I can concur with Mr. Jenkins' comments. One can forge a meaningful career path in this sector of higher ed. For you PhD's who are wondering whether you will be able to continue conducting research and engaging in publication: I believe that can happen (it has worked for me). I've held for a long time that the classroom may serve as a rich site for research. The skills that you bring to such possibilities are invaluable. Fundamentally, the most important quality that I believe PhD's bring to the community college is an intellectual curiosity. That will serve you well as you strive to continue to learn (about your subject, about your students, about pedagogy) and to improve.

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"Last fall, after I gave a talk on the community-college job search at a top-tier university, a faculty member came up to me to say how much she'd enjoyed the presentation. Then she added, with barely concealed surprise, `This is actually a viable career path.'"

Thank you for an excellent essay, and thank you for an example of how isolated some R1 profs are.

Henry Adams

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