

Same Subject, Different Setting: Teaching Psychology from the Two-year Perspective

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As a graduate student in social psychology at the University of Oklahoma, I was groomed to go out into the world and work at a college or university as a psychology professor; this became my goal. In 1996, while I was almost done with my dissertation, a job offer at a private four-year college came my way, complete with a reduced teaching load so that I could finish my dissertation. I excitedly took the job and moved to Ohio where I taught for four years at The College of Wooster. In 1997, during my first year at Wooster, I finished my dissertation and began the road toward tenure. After very good second and fourth year reviews, I was well on my way, but my personal life dictated a change of venue. In 2000, I quit my tenure track position with no job prospects on the horizon, and planned a move to Phoenix, Arizona. I had several interviews for non-academic research jobs, and one academic job interview at Mesa Community College. I really wanted to continue teaching but thought the chances of landing an academic position were slim. When I was offered a residential faculty position at Mesa I took it, and my opinion of community colleges changed forever.

Teaching at a two-year college has been a very rewarding experience. Mesa Community College is one of the largest community colleges in the country (approximately 25,000 students) and part of the largest community college district in the country (the Maricopa County Community College district has 10 colleges, two skill centers, and serves approximately 240,000 students per year). At Mesa, I was in a department of 10 full time psychology faculty. I have since transferred across town to Glendale Community College (approximately 20,000 students) and I am now in a department with 12 full-time psychology faculty members. I offer courses I enjoy teaching (statistics, research methods, black psychology), I can have a direct impact on curriculum development, and I do research when I want, with no pressure. I also advise student groups (I am co-advisor for Psi Beta, the psychology honor society for two-year schools, and Compass the gay/straight alliance group).

One difference between working at a university and working at a two-year school is the tenure system. At two-year schools, there is tenure, but there is no rank associated with your position, such as assistant, associate, or full. So from the day I was hired my title was the same as that of all of my colleagues.

Probably the biggest surprise has been the professional development support. I believed I would not be able to continue to attend conventions, but that was incorrect. I have been able to travel to conventions each year to present research, give symposia, and learn about the latest research in various areas of psychology.

The most rewarding aspect of being a two-year school professor is that I interact with many first generation college students, and also non-traditional students returning to school after many years. Those students benefit from the small classes and personal attention they receive at a community college. Many of these students are intimidated by the size of the state universities, but after spending their first two years at a community college, they are more comfortable with the idea and transfer to a

university to complete their degree. At Glendale, we also have great technology resources for both students and faculty that help with classroom instruction.

People considering teaching at two-year schools should be prepared for some challenges. The first challenge is getting the job. In psychology, a PhD is going to be important, as there are many applicants for every job. Though the minimum requirement is a master's degree, 10 of the 12 full time residential faculty in my department have doctoral degrees. Because many community colleges pay competitive salaries, the competition for jobs is quite fierce.

Another major concern facing community college professors is teaching students with a wide range of levels of academic preparation for college level work. We maintain the standards of the universities that accept our classes for transfer credit while at the same time we admit a wider range of students. This means that the failure and dropout rate is often higher than at universities.

Probably the biggest challenge I notice, particularly at professional meetings, is that people at universities do not seem to respect community college professors. We are often treated as second-class citizens, and university professors seem surprised to learn that we have credentials and we choose to be where we are.

Lastly, research will not get a high priority at a two-year school, as students come first. If you conduct research, you do so primarily on your own time. Teaching loads are heavier than they are at universities – usually 12-15 credit hours per semester – so there will not be much time for research. Because I teach statistics and research methods, both classes with lab sections, I get a bit of a break on the number of courses I teach, but that is not the norm in community colleges. Many community colleges do not offer those classes.

While none of my graduate school professors ever mentioned community college as an option, I would encourage more people to investigate teaching at two-year schools. If you enjoy being in the classroom, a two-year school could be the perfect place for you. The experience is challenging, rewarding, and if you are self-motivated, research opportunities exist as well.