Academic Careers in Community Colleges*

Kent M. Brudney, *Cuesta College*

The job market for newly minted political science Ph.D.s has been bleak for a long time and is likely to remain so for a long time. There has been a lot of gnashing of teeth about this, and a lot has been made of doctoral students' need to consider "alternative careers." There has not, however, been much written about an alternative some young scholars may find attractive: teaching at a community college. As a political scientist who has made the transition from a regional university to a four-year liberal arts college and, finally, to a community college, I know how rewarding it can be to teach at a community college. I also know first hand that many community colleges are actively seeking to recruit faculty with terminal degrees, partly to take advantage of the sluggish academic job market (Haworth 1999a, A12). Therefore, I thought this a propitious time to translate my experience into some useful recommendations for political science graduate students who might be weighing the advantages and disadvantages of community college teaching. My suggestions are aimed at both those with a doctorate and those who have been advanced to candidacy and might be wavering over whether to write the dissertation. They are also aimed at the faculty in doctoral departments who want to undertake serious and sustained measures to prepare some of their candidates for community college careers.

Before I continue, I will include one important caveat. Conditions and practices at community colleges vary from state to state and, depending on the state (some have more centralized systems than others), from district to district. Faculty and job candidates in doctoral departments should be thoroughly familiar with the characteristics of community colleges in their state and, especially, neighboring community college districts. At the end of this article, I have included an annotated listing of web sites that provide the information job seekers and advisors will need to make informed choices about community college careers.

Kent M. Brudney *teaches political science at Cuesta College in San Luis Obispo, California. His doctorate is from UCLA (1977). He served as a member of APSA's Education and Professional Development Committee between 1997 and 2000.*

Evaluating the Positives and Negatives of a Community College Career

To succeed in and enjoy a career as a community college faculty member, a political scientist must see herself primarily as a teacher and as a teacher of students whose motivation and academic preparation varies widely. An ABD or Ph.D. who would accept any academic job and who "just ends up" in a community college will probably not be happy. Besides, hiring committees, already alert to and suspicious of Ph.D.s who are "slumming" for any old position, will quickly and properly ferret out imposters. Candidates accepting a full-time community college position as a temporary fix until "something better comes along," will probably later discover, to their dismay, that the experience will do little to build their resumes and may actually make them less attractive to hiring committees at four-year colleges and universities. On the other hand, those who excel in teaching and are attracted to the prospect of interacting with the diversity of students who typically enroll in community colleges are ready to begin thinking seriously about the plusses and minuses of community college teaching.

The Positives

Community college students are diverse in age, race, national origin, and social class. Although most, with the exception of older ("returning") students, are not highly motivated and focused, neither are they jaded or obsessed by careerism. They are, in general, remarkably open to and appreciative of good teaching. They are excited by new ideas. (I have found that most ideas are new to my students.) In recognition of the pervasive absence of academic skills among community college students, especially writing skills, good academic support services are commonly available. My older students are typically highly motivated and diligent and make notable contributions in my classes. Many community colleges attract a modest but increasing number of well-prepared students directly out of high school. These students frequently come from families that either cannot afford tuition at four-year schools or which have determined that a community college provides a better value for lower-division course work, especially when compared to a large public university where teaching is done mainly by teaching assistants and where introductory lecture courses enroll 300 or more students. In California, as competition has increased for admission to schools in the state university systems, more students are finding it necessary to enroll in community colleges.

Recent changes in the governance structure of the California community college system have made individual campuses less centralized and hierarchical—less like high schools—and more collegial. In 1989, California's state legislature instituted a four-year tenure system that raised professional standards and that required faculty to play a significant role in hiring and evaluating tenure-track faculty. (The old tenure system consisted of a two-year process controlled by administrators.) The legislation also established a system of shared governance that has, somewhat erratically, devolved plenary responsibility for academic policy to the faculty. Efforts have also been

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made to raise academic standards (Haworth 1999b), but these have sometimes been undone by administrators' desire to follow new management models wherein students become "clients" and faculty become "learning facilitators." When an educational institution's mission is conceived to be "providing services" and "ensuring student success," toughening course requirements and standards can be interpreted as counterproductive.

The pay at public two-year colleges is roughly comparable to that at most comprehensive public universities (i.e., nondoctoral institutions) and many independent four-year colleges. For 1999–2000, the average salary for full-time faculty at public two-year institutions was $46,947. At public baccalaureate institutions the average for this group was $47,849, and at comprehensive institutions it was $52,982 ("1999–2000 AAUP Faculty Salaries" 2000). In California, unionization in all but a few community college districts has kept salaries and benefits comparable to the positions sought by most political science Ph.D.s.[1]

Many community colleges have equipped faculty and classrooms with computer technologies, though student access to computer labs has lagged. At Cuesta, all full-time faculty members have computers and all political science classrooms are equipped with computers and data projectors. Community colleges are eager to provide additional courses via satellite and Internet, so candidates with distance education experience sometimes have an advantage in the hiring process.

Finally, community colleges might be attractive to job seekers for whom location is an important factor, as it is for the increasing number of dual-doctoral couples. The high concentration of community colleges in large metropolitan areas offers abundant opportunities for placement.

The Negatives

The course load is heavy. I teach five three-unit courses per semester, with an average enrollment of 40 students in each class, which is typical for community college political scientists. Virtually all Cuesta social scientists require students to write essay examinations or take-home essays, or both, but the college does provide money to hire readers. By way of comparison, political science instructors at the local (nondoctoral) California State University campus teach three four-unit courses or four three-unit courses per quarter, for a total of 9 to 12 courses per academic year. Comparing this to my 10 courses shows that the discrepancy in workloads is not always as great as suspected. Community college faculty, like all professors, are required to hold office hours, commonly one hour per week for each hour of instruction, and they are obligated to sit on several committees.

Because the curriculum is limited, a political scientist at a small or medium-sized community college could expect to teach American government and politics most of the time. Expanding the curriculum is difficult because of transfer agreements with public universities and because of cost. Too many of the sections of American government are taught by underpaid part-time faculty (prorata pay is uncommon) for shortsighted budgetary reasons. Though the vast majority of Cuesta's part-time faculty are fully qualified—an increasing number of our part-time faculty are advanced graduate students from nearby doctoral institutions—their availability to students and their connection to the full-time faculty are understandably limited. This problem is not unknown at four-year colleges and universities, but some community colleges have part-time faculty bear over half of the school's instructional load.

Administrators can hire part-time faculty at a deep discount, so they have an incentive to employ as few full-time political scientists as possible. At Cuesta, there are only three full-time political scientists. Thus, the opportunities for on-campus professional exchanges are limited. Worse, political scientists at neighboring universities and colleges have not been enthusiastic about establishing professional contacts with community college faculty. Professional isolation can be a problem, but the Internet has improved the situation substantially. In California, funds for "professional development" are generous. I have found that administrators are eager to provide additional assistance to professionally active faculty members. Campus-based professional development programs, which are mandated in California, are generally of little use because they are not discipline-based and because they too often include cheerleading for the latest untested educational fads. I have, however, found Cuesta's administration very willing to assist faculty in developing technological skills.

Some community colleges have sabbatical programs. At Cuesta, tenured faculty are eligible every six years to take one semester off from teaching at full pay or two semesters off at 80% of full pay. The awarding of sabbaticals is competitive, selection being based on the merits of a proposed project. A project with research and publication as its sole rationale would likely be viewed unfavorably, but it is not difficult to construct a rationale that emphasizes pedagogical or "student learning" outcomes. In order to keep current in the discipline, I have taken advantage of the sabbatical program, the ample funds available to attend professional meetings, and a variety of summer programs and seminars.[2]

The shaping of academic policy at community colleges can be a disheartening experience because many faculty and administrators are not rooted in the academic disciplines. The problem lies not so much in the heat that is generated in policy discussions—I grew accustomed to unproductive meetings while working at a comprehensive institution and at a liberal arts college—but in the absence of shared academic values and a common vocabulary. And, in keeping with the high-school model of education decision making, counselors and other support staff with responsibility for interpreting numerous governmental mandates have far greater power to determine academic policy at community colleges than they would at most four-

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year colleges and universities. In other words, professional autonomy and expertise are not highly valued when curriculum choices are made. Nevertheless, community college faculty members enjoy considerable autonomy in the classroom.

Because a significant number of community college students drifted through high school, faculty must balance their responsibility to teach content with their responsibility to respond effectively to students' lack of many basic academic skills, from writing and analysis to note taking. When I started teaching at Cuesta, I quickly learned that I would either have to lower my expectations for student performance or I would have to adjust my methods to help students meet college-level expectations. I chose the latter option. I slowed down the pace (relatively painless in our 18-week semesters). I deemphasized coverage in order to spend additional time exploring topics in detail.[3] I provided study aids in class and constructed a web site (www.cuesta.cc.ca.us/faculty/kbrudney) with links to a student forum where they could post questions for me and each other and share schedules for arranging study groups, a site with current assignments and model answers to homework assignments, and the textbook publisher's web site where students could complete practice quizzes and find other resources. My syllabus became longer as I addressed the academic weaknesses of so many of the younger students. None of this came easily to me. I was forced by circumstances and helped by advice from my able colleagues to become a more effective community college teacher.

Teaching is primary in tenure decisions in California community colleges, and the state legislature has mandated annual peer evaluations of tenure-track faculty. In addition, tenured faculty and part-time faculty are evaluated triennially. At its best, the peer-evaluation procedure increases the evaluators' awareness of effective and ineffective teaching methods, and it provides constructive criticism to the faculty member being evaluated. I have learned quite a bit by observing my colleagues. In turn, my peers have been consistently clear and fair in identifying both my strengths and weaknesses in the classroom. At its worst, peer evaluation can lead to attempts to impose uniformity in teaching and to undue emphasis on pedagogy over disciplinary expertise. Under any circumstances, because there are so many faculty being evaluated so much of the time and because there are relatively few full-time faculty to do the evaluating, the peer-evaluation process too often intrudes on other faculty responsibilities.

Appendix
Community College Web Sites

Community College Web

Includes a variety of links and a search engine for community college web sites.
<www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/cc>

American Association of Community Colleges Careerline

Includes some listings of open faculty positions. The lists are hit and miss, so that the best method for locating current listings is to search the site for a particular community college.
<www.aacc.nche.edu/career/careerline.asp>

Chronicle Career Network

Many community colleges advertise positions in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
<www.chronicle.com/jobs>

The Registry

Job registry for the California Association of Community Colleges. Several other states sponsor similar sites.
<http://registry.yosemite.cc.ca.us>

US News & World Report Community College Search Engine

<www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/communit/commsrch.htm>

College Opportunities On-Line

National Center for Educational Statistics U.S. college and university search engine.
<http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/cool/Search.asp>

Community College Review

Includes abstracts for research on community college education and on academic careers in community colleges.
<www2.ncsu.edu/ncsu/cep/acce/ccr/abstracts.htm>

Preparing for a Community College Position

Anyone considering applying for a community college faculty position must think seriously and early about whether accepting such a position will allow him to achieve his long-term career goals. It is unlikely, however, that many doctoral students will seriously pursue the community college route in the first years of their graduate education, and it is equally unlikely that faculty in doctoral programs will welcome or accommodate community college

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career aspirations. So, the following advice assumes that, for the immediate future at least, the onus of preparation will fall on individual doctoral students.

Many faculty who will be sitting on community college hiring committees harbor a negative perception of Ph.D.s. This negative perception stems from the suspicion that applicants who hold doctorates do not know how to teach, do not care much about teaching, and "aren't trained to deal with the rigors of teaching five or six courses a semester, including some at the introductory or remedial level" (Haworth 1999a).[4]

In the cover letter and during an interview, make the case that your doctoral training uniquely qualified you for the position by affording you teaching experiences you would not have had if you stopped at the master's level and equipped you with tools needed to maintain disciplinary currency. Turn what many in the community college system see as a liability into an asset. When I serve on hiring committees, I find it difficult to advocate for doctoral applicants whose *vitae* show little evidence of teaching interest or experience and whose letters of recommendation focus on the quality of their dissertations and their high scholarly potential. Submitting applications designed to highlight qualifications for a job at a large research institution only reinforces suspicions community college hiring committees have that Ph.D.s lack a proper sense of audience and are merely tryng to find a job while having no clear sense of the kind of job they are seeking.

Even granting that this characterization is not wholly accurate, it is true that there is one quality that M.A. job candidates more commonly possess than Ph.D. job candidates: the expectation and desire to be teachers. As the products of departments that emphasize research and specialization, Ph.D. students typically come to see teaching as a secondary responsibility. Graduate school faculty would not likely view their doctoral programs as successful if large numbers of graduates were placed in institutions in which good teaching was the primary professional responsibility. Most doctoral job candidates would likely see placement in an institution (and especially in a community college) with a heavy teaching load and few incentives to conduct research and publish as considerably below their ideal—as something they might have to "settle for." Consequently, M.A.s have traditionally been more suitable candidates for community college jobs and more energetic about finding such positions.

The more teaching experience the better. Diversify your experience by serving as a teaching assistant in a variety of lower-division political science courses. If your department does not have a teaching assistant training program, work to get one started. Such a program would ideally include peer observations, observations by the faculty member teaching the course (it is especially important to have several faculty members familiar with your life as a teacher), the opportunity to have several class sessions video-taped, and periodic meetings of teaching assistants to share successes and failures. In short, the more aware you are of pedagogical issues and alternatives, the better chance you will have of being hired. Experience using computer technology inside the classroom and outside is always viewed favorably. It is essential that predoctoral and doctoral students obtain some part-time work at local community colleges. Such experience will, despite the diversity among community colleges, help you to decide if working at a community college is really for you. It will also assure hiring committee members that you have "appropriate experience." If you have community college teaching experience, be sure you include at least one letter of recommendation written by a community college political scientist who has observed your teaching.

The community college interview process is often rather formal and routinized. Many community college human resources officers insist that identical questions be asked of all candidates, and they discourage informal exchanges between the faculty and job candidates. Typically, job candidates will be interviewed by a hiring committee and then give a teaching demonstration, either conducting a "mini-lesson" before the hiring committee or giving a lecture before an actual class. In some cases, the teaching topic is specified; in others it is left up to the candidate's discretion. Succeeding in this environment requires that you research thoroughly the community college at which you will be interviewed.

Use the Internet to become familiar with community colleges in the area(s) of your job search. Become familiar with the mission statement and master plan of the community college to which you are applying and learn about the types of students it serves. Web sites of particular community colleges, generic community college web sites, and web sites of community college faculty and administrator organizations will provide you with a quick overview of national, state, and local issues, conditions, and trends in community college education.

Conclusion

As a graduate student, I was more interested in teaching than I was in doing high-powered scholarship, so I have found in Cuesta Community College a happy fit with my own objectives. The whims of fortune have brought me here, and, all in all, it was good fortune. I have become a more thoughtful and reflective teacher than I had been, and I have still found time to participate in the profession and to publish when I wanted to and when I felt that I had something to say. Most significant, I think, is that teaching at a community college, a grassroots institution of democratic educational opportunity, has allowed me to enjoy a richer experience of democracy. I have developed strong ties to my struggling but hopeful students and to the community Cuesta serves. In doing so, I believe I have come to the praxis of democracy.

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Notes

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1. For a listing of mean salaries for 1999–2000 at a variety of institutions, including some community colleges, see "1999–2000 AAUP Faculty Salaries" (2000).

2. The NEH Summer Seminar program has proved particularly helpful. Preference is given to faculty at four-year institutions and community colleges.

3. The lack of skills among so many of my students led me to note the need for a text that combines political science with skill development. Consequently, with John Culver of the California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, I wrote *Critical Thinking in American Government* (Harcourt, 1998).

4. The pros and cons of hiring Ph.D.s set off a lively debate in the "Letters to the Editor" section of the February 5, 2000, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* Most of the letter writers, especially those community college faculty who opposed the effort to hire Ph.D.s, focused on recent doctoral students' alleged lack of teaching skills. Several of the letter writers emphasized how doctoral training did not prepare instructors to execute the community college curriculum or effectively address the academic deficiencies of so many community college students. The opponents of hiring Ph.D.s predicted that the heavy teaching load would prove disheartening to individuals trained to pursue research and publication. Not surprisingly, none of the letter writers mentioned that reluctance among community college administrators to hire Ph.D.s is very much a bottom-line issue. Most community college pay scales are based on degrees and graduate units—so-called "column placement." Ph.D.s are typically more expensive to hire than M.A.s.

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