

Community college teachers have more time to devote to students

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When I visit with teachers employed in public schools, I often hear, “You are already where I want to be. College. That’s where we all want to be.”

Many public school teachers consider pursuing master’s degrees with the goal of someday teaching college. Unfortunately, many of them are under misconceptions. More than once, someone has applied for a position at Howard College who was not aware of certain realities. For those who have considered teaching at a community college, here are a few things of which to be aware.

In most areas, you must have a master’s degree with at least 18 graduate hours in the field in which you want to teach. I get many applications from people who have a master’s in education and want to teach art, English, biology or whatever job we have posted. Unlike public schools where you can get additional certification in various fields, teaching at a college or university requires you have at least 18 graduate hours in that field. Education hours are extremely limiting, especially at a community college. There are only a handful of education courses taught at community colleges, so there is generally no need for an instructor with a master’s in education. If you want to teach college, make sure you have those 18 hours in a specific field.

Another thing that surprises many people is community college pay. Public school teachers make



more money than we do. I quoted a salary to an applicant last year who responded, “Is that per semester?” This is probably the most heartbreaking thing for many public school teachers. They work so hard to get those master’s degrees, thinking the pay is comparable or better to what they are already making. Even at higher-paying community colleges, the salary usually is not better. My mom took a pay cut to move from public school to community college. It was worth it to her because she did not have responsibilities such as bus duty, but it was still a significant financial change.

Applicants have asked me about research funding. Some community colleges do have research opportunities, particularly in the STEM fields. However, most colleges do not have funding for research and do not expect their instructors to do research work. That type of “publish or perish” position is usually found at universities. Tenure is another thing that is usually found only at universities. Only a handful of community colleges still offer tenure.

A few years ago, a new faculty member leaned in the door of my office and said, “I have been living in a dream world.” This was her first semester teaching anything other than as a graduate assistant at a major university. She had the idea coming in that college students would have a strong knowledge base, discipline and study skills. She, like most of our new faculty, was surprised at students’ limited knowledge and skills. I often joke that college students are not that different from K-12. They are just bigger and know more swear words. While that is not entirely true, the perception that a community college student is actually more advanced than a high school or even middle school student is inaccurate. Our students represent a variety of experiences and skills. Many are essentially university students, but it is unrealistic to expect all of them to perform at the university level.

So lower pay, more education and same students -- you might be wondering why people would want to work at a community college. For me, and many of my colleagues, it is about the students. Our students come to us for a number of reasons. Some are returning to college after years in the workforce. Others are just not ready academically, financially, or even emotionally for a university. Without distractions such as research and tenure, we can focus on these students and help them find their way. Many of them are looking for mentoring and guidance; we have the time and the passion to provide that for them. We are the bridge between their past and future. With small class sizes, we can work with them and connect with them in ways that might not happen at a university, particularly in freshman-level courses that are taught by teaching assistants and have hundreds enrolled.

Teaching for anyone is a calling. No one does it for the money or the fame. Community college is no exception. We have more academic freedom than the K-12 teachers do, but we have our own unique challenges. I often joke that we have to “MacGyver” things because our funding is limited. It is sometimes frustrating, but if you love knowledge and working with students who need a little something extra, community college is an exciting, rewarding place to call home.

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