

What to Expect in Your First Semester at a Community College

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Image: Kevin Van Aelst

Community colleges are not monolithic. Each has its own culture, its own array of personalities, and its own way of doing things. Yet my experience — more than three decades at five different two-year colleges in four states — suggests that most of them have a great deal in common, too. With that in mind, if you're new to full-time teaching in the community-college sector, here's what you can probably expect as you start work this fall.

First I should note: I've touched on this ground a little in previous essays. One focused on [tips for new teachers](#) and the other on [five traits](#) of a successful faculty member. But I was inspired to revisit the topic this summer after reading [Manya Whitaker's essay](#) in *The*

Chronicle on "How to Start Off Right in Your New Job." She offered excellent advice on what faculty recruits need to do just before and just after they start work on a new campus. Most of her advice applies as much to community-college instructors as it does to their four-year counterparts.

Yet there are things unique to the academic culture at two-year colleges. So this month, I'd like to take a slightly different tack and talk, not about what new faculty members should do, but about what they can expect in their first semester on the tenure track (or with some kind of multiyear contract). Much of this advice would also apply to new hires at other types of teaching-focused institutions.

Even if you've taught before as an adjunct at a community college, you'll find that a full-time position is quite a different creature, with a unique set of expectations and potential pitfalls. Likewise, if your previous full-time teaching experience was somewhere other than at a two-year college, you are in for a few surprises.

(Trigger warning: Some of what follows may seem depressing at first, but hang in there. Your first year in a full-time gig at any college is tough, but it gets better.)

Brain overload. After your first few days of meetings, meetings, and then more meetings, your head will no doubt be swimming. You'll be thinking, "There's no way I can remember all this." And you'll be right — you can't.

The good news: Nobody really expects you to. Anyway, most of it's written down somewhere, most likely in a (relatively) easy-to-access online format. Plus, there will always be people you can ask. The purpose of all the meetings is more to fulfill the college's obligation to provide training — and to impress you with the weighty significance of your new endeavor — than to actually convey information.

So if you start to feel overwhelmed and frustrated, just remember that next year you won't have to attend all of those meetings. (But you will have to attend some of them.)

Teaching fatigue. When I tell graduate students that they can expect to teach five courses a semester at a community college, their eyes pop, their jaws drop, and the blood drains from their faces. They understand intuitively what some might be tempted to gloss over: Even for those of us who like to teach, five classes are a lot.

If you're fortunate enough to have landed a full-time faculty position at a community college, you may still be giddily in denial regarding the workload. You're probably thinking, "I can do this!"

Yes, you can. You may even come to love it once you develop a few psychological callouses. But in the meantime, while you're getting used to it, all that teaching can take its toll on your physical and mental health, your relationships, and your other personal and professional

interests. Steel yourself for a steep learning curve.

Red tape. When I first started teaching at a community college, in 1987, one of my favorite things about the job was that I had so little paperwork to attend to — especially compared with my friends who taught at elementary and secondary schools.

A lot has changed in 32 years. As a full-time faculty member at a two-year college, I still have less paperwork than my high-school-teacher friends — but only because they now have roughly three times as much as they did back in 1987.

For me, the amount of record-keeping and form-filing has also multiplied by a factor of about three — in response to new institutional policies, state guidelines, and federal regulations.

None of it is particularly challenging, and much of it seems to be pointless, but it's all fairly time-consuming. If you think all you have to do in your new job is show up and teach — well, sorry to burst your bubble. That's like an eager, young, newly licensed physician thinking all she has to do is treat patients. And even if you've taught at a community college as an adjunct and are thus somewhat used to the red tape, you will find that your new full-time role brings with it even more of the same.

Exploitation. That word is probably a bit harsh in this context, and I don't mean it in the worst sense, like child labor in developing countries. Of your own free will, you took a job for which you are being reasonably well paid (at the very least, you knew the salary going in), and you're therefore obligated to fulfill the duties of the position. It's not exactly indentured servitude.

And yet.

Look, to put it as plainly as I can, as a new full-time faculty member at a community college, you face a decent chance of getting somewhat dumped on.

There will be people on the campus — including (especially?) in your own department — who will expect you (because you're new and lack tenure) to take on all sorts of tasks and responsibilities that nobody else wants to do. That might include serving on certain unpopular committees, sponsoring time-consuming student organizations, and being assigned extra students to advise, among other duties.

The dumpers may tell themselves that it's for your own good. After all, you — aka, the dumpee — need experience on your CV to bolster your promotion and tenure bid down the road (or to get onto the tenure track, if you're not there already).

But the truth is, many of your new colleagues are just tired of serving on that boring committee or sponsoring that time-consuming organization. They are beside themselves with glee to have fresh meat on whom to offload said chores.

The essential problem is that your CV does need to show experience in those areas — they are part of the job. What you want to avoid is being buried under too many service obligations, especially as you're getting used to managing a heavy load of teaching, meetings, and paperwork.

If you're lucky, you'll have a dean, a department chair, or an experienced faculty mentor who will protect your time. If not, you need to protect it yourself. Realistically, you can probably serve on two committees and maybe sponsor (or better yet, co-sponsor) one student organization in your first year. Beyond that, learn the art of saying no.

Genuine diversity. But enough with the downsides of your transition. How about some good news? One of the very best things about this job, for me, has always been the truly remarkable diversity of the community-college classroom.

I call it "genuine" because it's not manufactured, through arbitrary admissions policies, nor is it merely skin deep. Diversity across a wide range of spectrums — race, gender, ethnicity, age, culture, religion, politics, interests, intellectual ability, physical ability, you name it — is simply a feature of campus life. Most two-year colleges have open-door policies, meaning they will serve just about anyone. In consequence, they do.

That means you can expect a remarkable richness in your classroom. You'll have a 17-year-old, dual-enrollment student seated next to a 40-year-old former homemaker. A young Sudanese refugee will work on a group project with a middle-aged truck driver. A student-athlete will take notes for a wheelchair-bound student with cerebral palsy.

In one of my writing classes recently, I had an editing group composed of two affluent young Jewish women and two young Muslim women, hijabs and all. When I offered, halfway through the semester, to switch up the groups so they could benefit from some other perspectives, they politely refused to move. "We love our group," they told me.

I loved their group, too. They learned a great deal from one another, while helping each other produce some pretty good writing. More important, the four of them taught me a great deal, individually and collectively. That's what teaching at a community college is like.

Supportive colleagues. Also on the positive side of the ledger will be your colleagues. They will probably be a rather diverse group, too. More important, from your perspective, they will almost certainly be supportive (some more than others, of course).

Yes, there will be those who see you primarily as "fresh meat," an opportunity to escape some long-hated task. (Just remember, it's for your own good.) There will be a few cynical and jaded types, perhaps a crusty curmudgeon or two. (I once had an "experienced" faculty member tell me, in my first day at a new job, "The guy before you only lasted one year.") And there will certainly be those who politely acknowledge your presence in the hall (or not) but otherwise keep to themselves. These are academics, after all.

But you will also have colleagues who will go far out of their way to make your experience as a new department member as easy and pleasant as possible. They will befriend you at meetings, sit by you at lunch, offer to share their course materials, and patiently answer your endless questions. You can also band together with other rookies (regardless of discipline), as well as with folks just a year or two ahead of you on the employment track. From those two cohorts, you will likely make some of your best, lifelong friends. Thirty years from now, you'll be sitting across a table from each other, shaking your heads and saying, "I can't believe we've been here 30 years!"

That is what I wish for you, and what you will certainly achieve if you can endure some of the comparatively minor annoyances of the job. Because there's no question that your first instinct is correct: You absolutely can do this.

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