

*Teaching Psychology at the Community College*

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Over a year ago, a colleague who teaches at a university asked me, “What’s it like teaching psychology at a community college?” Although I can share my perspective based upon my experience working at my college, I cannot direct you to a body of literature on the subject. In their study of psychology curriculum offered at various post-secondary institutions, Perlman & McCann (1999) examined a sample of community college catalogs and described the types of courses offered. To my knowledge, no one has systematically studied the needs, concerns, and contributions of psychologists whose primary livelihood is teaching at the community college. Nor has there been an organization whose central purpose was to network and represent the interests and needs of community college psychologists. Fortunately, APA recently formed Psychology Teachers at the Community College (PT@CC). Gathering information on CC psychology is the top priority for the six community college psychology teachers who serve on PT@CC’s steering committee. More on PT@CC in a moment. For now please allow me to describe my perspective of teaching psychology at a community college in southern California over the last 25 years.

Public community colleges have non-selective admission policies and therefore provide open access to anyone who is 18 or older with or without a high school diploma. In fact, community colleges in many states even have limited admission procedures for children who are under 18 and still attending a high school or an elementary school. As a result, our students bring a wealth of diversity to the classroom. Students vary widely in many ways including ethnicity, nationality, age, commitment to learning, and readiness for academic work. Within one classroom, students may range from those still in high school, high school dropouts who run a successful business, returning housewives and other reentry students, students simultaneously enrolled at nearby universities, and others already having degrees. Some of our first-year freshmen could easily have gotten into a university, but for a variety of reasons chose the nearby “JC.” Other freshmen simply hadn’t the choice; their high school GPAs or SAT scores precluded them from beginning their college education at a university.

As far as academic readiness is concerned, in a given fall semester as many as 50% of the freshmen we serve don’t know about, or choose not to use, the most basic strategies necessary for learning: note-taking, reading and highlighting the text, managing their time, and attending class regularly. These latter students are in somewhat of a gray area—some of them, with our help, adjust and become very capable students, others fade away, at least for a while. Please understand, I am not bemoaning the type of students we serve. I am not one of those who await the arrival of the “real” students so I can “really teach.” These are the students we have been hired to serve.

Community college teachers have a unique challenge; this challenge is in large part why we choose to teach at this level. We strive to teach content while maintaining academic standards equivalent to the university. We must also instill in our students strategies for efficient learning and attitudes appropriate for academic success. In short, teaching new faces how to be students is a big part of our job. How well do we community college psychology teachers meet this challenge? Most of my evidence is anecdotal, but not all. Community college transfer students do quite well in California. The University of California's research unit recently reported that during their junior year, the GPA of transfer students usually exceeds the junior year GPAs of the university's native students. This fact is all the more impressive when one considers that many successful transfer students are not "university-qualified" when they start at the 2-year college. I recall several former Irvine Valley students, now with PhDs in psychology, who were among our unprepared freshmen taking one of my introductory psychology classes. The extent to which these "value added" success stories occur is not systematically monitored, but I'm confident they are true for every community college.

What are one's responsibilities and contractual obligations when teaching at a community college? I believe my college is fairly typical. We are on a semester system and have a basic teaching load of 15 hours per week, which translates to teaching five 3-unit classes each semester. Teachers earn supplemental pay for teaching overload and summer classes. Other duties include five office hours per week and service on at least one standing committee that meets monthly. Although some faculty do research and publish their work, it isn't expected, encouraged, or even recognized by most community colleges. Advising a student organization, such as Psi Beta, is completely optional and uncompensated, but self-satisfying and provides an opportunity to network with colleagues from other community colleges.

There are what some might consider some negative aspects to community college teaching. Depending on the size of the department and student body, for example, one may be teaching four or more different preparations in the same term. Teaching assistants don't exist. Many of us spend more time in meetings and serving on committees than one can imagine. One semester I served on over eight committees whose purposes ranged from hiring new instructors to being the Academic Senate representative for the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences. It is unrealistic to expect the college to help pay membership dues to professional organizations like APA, APS, or state and regional psychological associations. Nor can one expect much financial help in order to attend professional conferences. A PsycINFO subscription is far beyond the department's or college library's budget.

As for our "product," we are unsure how many of our students consider themselves to be psychology majors because transfer-bound students must declare themselves to be "general studies" majors while they prepare for their upper division psychology coursework. Except for former students who stay in touch, we rarely receive student-level feedback as to how well former psychology students are performing at the university.

Although we feel we are making a considerable contribution to the education of future psychologists, we are only now beginning to collect transfer student outcome data through a series of data-sharing consortia under development throughout the state. These consortia arrangements soon will provide detailed information, such as courses taken and grades earned

by community college transfer students in their upper division courses. Such information will greatly improve our program review processes.

Finally, although teaching and mentoring students at a community college is highly rewarding, I suspect many CC teachers experience isolation because they have no professional connection with their counterparts at other 2-year colleges or with psychology organizations. Understandably, this isolation and disconnectedness is greater for adjunct faculty and those teaching at smaller colleges where one teacher may constitute the “psychology department.” These concerns take us back to PT@CC's top priorities.

Recently APA's members voted to establish a membership opportunity, PT@CC, designed especially to serve community college psychology teachers. PT@CC hopes to facilitate professional networking and recognition of CC psychologists. Current APA membership data reveal that only about 320 members of APA list their primary employment as teaching at a 2-year college. PT@CC hopes to provide a new path for CC psychologists to become full voting members of APA. To this end, the PT@CC steering committee has initiated strategies on several fronts. One strategy will be to gather information on community college psychology. PT@CC's recent survey (Johnson & Rudmann, in press) studied the demographic make-up and educational preparation of community college psychology faculty. PT@CC's current study is gathering information about the needs and services desired by CC faculty. So far, the response to the survey is enthusiastic and positive.

In the near future, we plan to investigate the methods by which psychology programs at community colleges are focusing on student learning outcomes. The findings will be used to develop and share an archive of course and program learning objectives, assessment instruments, scoring rubrics, and reports describing how faculty are using learning outcome data to move from teacher-centered to learner-centered instruction. Eager to provide help, APA recently assisted PT@CC by establishing an “Electronic Update” service for its members. PT@CC and the APA Education Directorate are using this service to send periodic announcements of important news and events to PT@CC members. (To subscribe the Electronic Update, please contact Martha Boenau in the Education Directorate at 202-336-6140 or e-mail Martha at [Mboenau@apa.org](mailto:Mboenau@apa.org).) The PT@CC steering committee, with the help of suggestions being collected through paper and online surveys, will continue to develop resources designed to meet the unique needs of those teaching psychology at the community college.

PT@CC is also exploring strategies to develop regional and local PT@CC facilitators. PT@CC's goal is to provide networking and professional growth opportunities to all community college psychology teachers, no matter how small their program, geographically remote their college, or their status as an adjunct for fulltime professor.

As I look back on my 25 years of teaching, there is very little I would change. Teaching has been both challenging and enormously rewarding. However, I certainly wish there had been an organization like PT@CC to provide professional development opportunities, and to recognize the important work being done by psychologists teaching at the community

colleges. PT@CC has great potential to help CC teaching become even more effective, rewarding, and satisfying.

#### References

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Perlman, B., & McCann, L. I. (1999). The most frequently listed courses in the undergraduate psychology curriculum. *Teaching of Psychology*, 26, 177-182.