

Characteristics of Successful Community College Academicians

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Training for an academic career often focuses primarily on gaining academic credentials but entails little instruction regarding acquiring of a teaching position and achieving success as a faculty member. In this chapter, I will draw from my 25 years of experience teaching and serving on hiring committees at Mesa Community College to unveil the qualities that distinguish those who are likely to be hired and to become successful academicians in the two-year college setting.

Mesa Community College (MCC) is the largest of ten colleges in the Maricopa Community College District. Mesa College is located in Mesa, Arizona and has a student body of 27,000 students who matriculate on two separate campuses. Mesa College is a publicly funded two-year commuter institution, located approximately 15 min from Arizona State University. Many MCC students transfer to Arizona State University after two years and many are also simultaneously enrolled in both institutions, so called “swirlers.” The MCC student body is quite diverse in regard to ethnicity, age, and academic preparation. The Psychology Department consists of 12 full time faculty, three men and women, and about 35 adjunct faculty. Each semester, approximately 4,000 students enroll in the 25 different courses offered by the Psychology Department.

Academic Preparation for Teaching

The minimum requirements for someone to teach in the Maricopa Community College District are a Masters Degree and at least 18 hours of graduate work in the specific subject area. Often there are many applicants for a full-time teaching position in Psychology, so candidates must have much more than the minimum even to merit an interview when a position becomes available. Although not technically required, a PhD is almost a prerequisite for final selection.

When an interview committee reviews the curriculum vitae (CV) of prospective candidates, it may be looking for expertise in a particular specialty or they may be looking for breadth of background. Regardless of the specifics of a given hiring situation, a solid background in statistics and research, both academic and experiential, is often highly valued. This strong research background often correlates with an emphasis on the scientific approach to the study of psychology, a perspective that MCC heartily advocates.

Teaching Experience Desired

During the educational process, you focus on the acquisition of knowledge. When you prepare to teach, the focus shifts. You still must have a deep reservoir of knowledge, but the emphasis shifts to your ability to transmit that information to others effectively. A hiring committee will be much more impressed with a candidate who can formulate an effective analogy to explain a concept than with a candidate who can explain the concept to the “nth degree,” but only in technical terms. Prospective candidates who have recently graduated must learn to shift from trying to demonstrate how much they know to trying to demonstrate how well they can communicate that information to students. Teaching experience is highly valued, so prospective candidates should build a CV with documented teaching assistantships and adjunct teaching experience. Experience and teaching expertise are primary hiring considerations.

Teaching experience in statistics and research methods is particularly desirable. Many people shy away from teaching these subjects, so those who are willing and have shown competence in this area are often prized candidates. Since approximately eight sections of Statistics and four sections of Research Methods are taught at MCC each semester, demonstrated competence to teach these subjects is advantageous.

Many successful candidates get their “foot in the door” by teaching as adjunct faculty at the prospective employment site, which provides them with an opportunity to gain needed experience as well as to become familiar with the faculty, the mission, and goals of the department. It also affords the department the opportunity to observe the prospective

candidate's ability to relate to students and manage the various tasks associated with being an effective faculty member. Candidates are well advised to take advantage of opportunities for adjunct teaching at a local community college while they are completing their graduate work.

Technical expertise is another valued characteristic of potential faculty members. Although this factor alone will not get you hired, it is a valued asset and can facilitate effective teaching. At MCC, a "micro-teach" presentation is included as part of the interview process. This opportunity allows candidates to demonstrate effective use of technology in their mini-lecture. A command of the technological tools available today signals that candidates are progressive and likely to prefer to be leading rather than following the pack throughout their careers.

Professional Experience and Affiliation

Practical experience in the psychology lab, the clinical world, or the industrial/organizational world is also a valued asset. Candidates who can draw from previous applied experience often bring new perspectives, applications, connections, and great practical examples to their classrooms. Candidates should emphasize their practical experiences, including research, on their CV and other application materials. If discussed during an interview, these experiences may set one candidate apart from the rest.

Another valued entry on a CV is membership in professional organizations such as the Society for Teaching of Psychology or the American Psychological Association. These affiliations may demonstrate strong identification with the field and a commitment to continued professional growth, as well as interest in organizations that facilitate excellent teaching and leadership opportunities. A potential candidate should strive to form such connections and take advantage of the opportunities that they offer.

Tacit Characteristics of Successful Academicians

So far, the discussion has focused on some of the tangible characteristics of faculty who are likely to be hired. Equally important, but less obvious, are the tacit characteristics that selection committees seek in a candidate. A love for teaching is a primary characteristic

of a highly desirable candidate. This quality is difficult to measure but is often evidenced by an emphasis on the process of teaching. Sometimes during an interview, a good teacher will refer to the joy that is generated when a student suddenly seems to “get it” or the satisfaction that comes when a student asks a good question. This interest in the individual experience of each student in the classroom is often indicative of a potentially good faculty member. Candidates may benefit from including student and colleague evaluations in their initial application materials as evidence of passion and talent for teaching.

Another highly sought after characteristic of a good candidate is a willingness to go beyond the specific teaching situation in the performance of the job. This quality may be manifest in various ways but the dedicated teacher is often interested in opportunities available for interaction with students outside the classroom. Dedicated teachers are passionate about their teaching, and as with any love affair, they show a constant desire to do more and to do it better. They are creative and venturesome, always searching for better ways to teach and not afraid of trying something new that could possibly fail.

In an interview, these teachers can readily describe an example of a classroom situation that provided them with an emotional high. Typically, these candidates have a high level of energy and enthusiasm for teaching. They are also avid lifelong learners with a hunger for new information and a passion for sharing what they have discovered with others. These characteristics should surface in candidates’ written applications and teaching statements. Successful candidates should include letters of recommendation and contact information for individuals who can give concrete examples of their creativity and passion for teaching. Graduate students might also look for ways to document their interest in teaching through attendance at teaching workshops as well as their publications or conference presentations related to teaching.

Finally, collegiality is a characteristic that is hard to document but highly desirable in a faculty member. This quality may be one of the most important determinants of a candidate’s eventual success and satisfaction in any given department. Because teamwork is

essential to optimal functioning of an academic department, a candidate who is willing to support departmental goals and to encourage colleagues becomes a potentially invaluable resource to the department. (A faculty member who fails in this regard may become a liability and may handicap the effectiveness and functionality of the entire department.) Candidates should carefully review the job description and the missions and goals of the department and institution prior to applying for a position to ensure that the position is a good fit for them. Although faculty are essentially autonomous in their individual classrooms, effective faculty are collegial and hold the welfare of their students and their departments in the highest regard.

For the individual who is passionate about teaching and about psychology, enjoys interacting with undergraduates, and is innovative and enthusiastic, the community college may be the ideal setting for a very rewarding academic career. In order to be successful, a candidate should carefully prepare the application, teaching statement, letters of recommendation, and CV to reflect a strong academic background in psychology, practical experience, teaching expertise, and evidence of passion for teaching and for students.