

## **Making the Transition to Teaching at a Community College: Perspectives and Insights**

When I began as an Assistant Professor of English at Broward Community College (now Broward College) in 2008, I had to make the transition to teaching at a community college. Up until that point, I had taught middle and high school students and had been a teaching assistant at the university where I earned my master's and doctoral degrees. However, I had no community college experience, either as a student or as a teacher.

Like most newly-minted PhDs, I was happy to have found a tenure-track job and, without much thought into what elements make community colleges different from universities and liberal arts colleges, I set about designing the syllabi and lessons for the English Composition classes I would be teaching that fall. It did not take long into my first semester for me to realize that much of what I had planned, no matter how well intended, was not going to work.

Although I have made great strides in adapting my teaching to community college students, the process of doing so has not been easy. And while I make no claims of being a "master" teacher, I do believe that some of my perspectives and insights into this experience might be helpful to those educators who find themselves in similar situations.

*Not all community college students are planning to transfer to four-year institutions.* I was shocked when I learned that not all of my students were planning on transferring to a four-year college or university. My understanding of community colleges at that time was fairly simple: students take their first two years of coursework at a community college, and then they transfer to a four-year institution (most likely a state college or university) where they complete their third and fourth years to earn a bachelor's degree.

What I didn't know then (and I'm embarrassed to admit now) was that my community college offers two different associate's degrees: an A.A. (Associate of Arts) and an A.S. (Associate of Science). While most of our students earn the former and do, in fact, transfer to a four-year state college or university, a fair amount of the students in my English Composition classes were planning on earning "career" or "technical" degrees that would help them immediately enter the workforce.

Therefore, I found myself teaching not just future four-year college and university students, but also future

dental hygienists and registered nurses. I'm not saying that I was disappointed to learn that I wasn't teaching *only* university-bound students; it was just something that surprised me. However, as I began to talk to more and more students, I began to see that my writing courses were designed more for my A.A. degree students and practically disregarded the needs of those students seeking an A.S. degree. This realization made me rethink the way I approached everything, including readings, essays, assignments, research, and grading. I also wondered what benefit a student planning on becoming an EMT or a paralegal would get from my class. I'm not saying I changed everything. However, the changes I made (and the things I kept the same) were informed by a greater awareness of and respect for the population of students I was teaching.

*The life experiences of community college students differ from those of four-year college and university students.* I don't intend to generalize or stereotype community college students here. So please give me some latitude with what follows. In my experience, students at community colleges have different priorities and backgrounds than those at four-year institutions. At the former, a faculty member is more likely to encounter a student who works full-time and who has children. We also may encounter students who have served in the military, been in prison or rehab, been homeless, or who have earned their GED. I have encountered all of these students at my community college. Many of the students I've had who have faced the hardest obstacles have been some of my best students, and some of them have been my worst.

I know four-year college students may share some of the experiences I listed above, but I doubt that they experience such challenges at the same frequency. And I'm not suggesting that community college students deserve our pity (compassion, perhaps), but knowing more about the life experiences of the students I teach has impacted the expectations I bring to teaching them.

I didn't "lower" my expectations, since doing so would be unnecessary and condescending. However, I did rethink my own expectations and their origin. Why did I value what I did when it came to assigning and grading essays and research papers? Were my expectations sensible or arbitrary? Appropriate or off base? So much of what I knew about teaching came from my own experiences as an undergraduate student at a small liberal arts college and as a graduate student at a large state university. But, I realized that I had to reconsider how applicable my own educational experiences were to the community college students I teach.

---

*There is (was) something called “developmental education.”* I knew that community colleges were open access, but I did not fully comprehend the significance of developmental education at these institutions until I started teaching at one. In Florida where I teach, developmental education was once a requirement for students who were deemed by certain standardized test scores to be “unprepared” to enter college-level courses. Developmental education courses could include English, reading, math, and study skills. Recently, however, Florida lifted this requirement with the intent of increasing graduation rates across the state. The immediate result has been a greater increase in the number of “underprepared” students entering college-level courses.

I have never taught a developmental English class. A fear of having my own grammatical imperfections exposed (and not any sense of elitism) has motivated this decision. However, in reality, I do teach “developmental” students, and anyone who teaches at a community college does as well, whether they admit it or not. When developmental education was still a requirement in Florida, I taught several students who had just completed their remedial coursework and, while I’m sure these classes helped them improve greatly, they entered my composition class still making what some might consider “remedial” errors (sentence fragments, punctuation errors, etc.).

With developmental education no longer a state requirement, I now teach students who just a year ago would have been prohibited from entering my English Composition 1 class until they had been “remediated” in one or more developmental English courses. Thus, not all of my college students are actually “college-ready,” a reality that has forced me to give serious reconsideration to the scope of what an introductory writing class can and cannot do.

*The differences between residential and commuter students matter.* My community college, like most, has no dorms or campus housing. Consequently, all of my students commute to campus. Of course I knew this when I started, but I failed to consider how this fact would contribute to what I could and could not accomplish with my students. Certain course activities never seemed to take off. Group projects always posed a problem. Later on, I realized that my students live all across the county and did not have the luxury of spending all day on campus to work on group presentations. Something that was relatively convenient for residential students was logistically difficult for commuting students.

Similarly, I would get upset when students would not show up to class when I was showing a film or when they would fail to show up for individual conferences to discuss drafts of their research papers. I interpreted this as them being disrespectful and irresponsible. However, I now have a better understanding of why some students decided not to participate in these types of activities.

For them the choice was an easy one: they would rather spend some extra time with their children or pick up some extra hours at work than drive all the way to campus in South Florida traffic to watch a movie they can watch on their own or sit down with me to discuss comments on their writing that I’d already written down for them.

Admittedly, I used to get upset by what I saw as “unacceptable” and even unforgivable behaviors: excessive absences, not turning in essays, coming to class late, and turning in work late. It’s not that the university students I taught while I was a teaching assistant never committed any of these infractions; they just didn’t do it as often and in the same numbers as my community college students. I have come to the realization, though, that the differences between commuting and residential students are significant and that the classes I design and the assignments I give must show an awareness of these differences. Again, I’m not saying that I’ve lifted all requirements for lateness and attendance. However, I’ve certainly considered the demands of commuting when crafting my class policies.

### Conclusion

I’m not sure if the advice I offer above is “innovative,” but I certainly believe that the perspective and insights I lay out in this article can encourage innovations and guide them in the right directions. For some, much of what I say may not be earthshattering. But for those educators who enter community colleges with no experience with and understanding of such institutions, the four pieces of advice I offer here may help you successfully make the transition, for the sake of your students and yourself.

**Christopher F. Johnston**, *Associate Professor, English, and District Director, Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*

For further information, contact the author at Broward College, 111 East Las Olas Boulevard, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301. Email: [cjohnsto@broward.edu](mailto:cjohnsto@broward.edu)