

in groups. Instead of telling the evening help TAs to invite students who seem isolated to work with others, I now tell my students that if they go to evening help they should be thinking about including students who come in alone to work in their groups and that TAs will remind them to do this.

From the first day I am explicit about how I want everyone to feel included and that we all have to work together to make that happen. Just as with anything else we want students to learn, this bears repeating often. One way that I drive this home in the first few classes is by drawing them into my attempts to learn names. I spend the five minutes before class greeting the students who come early, adding new students to my repertoire as they arrive. Then I make a game of asking the students to try to name all of the people in their row, or the people sitting next to them, or all of the students in another row in the first minute or two of class. I also do group work in the very first class, and make sure to exhort the students to introduce themselves. I have found that they engage with one another more if they work standing up at the boards rather than at tables, and I ask them to rotate who serves as the group scribe. In later weeks, as I stroll around to check in on different groups I give lighthearted “pop quizzes” where I ask them to name everyone in their group to reemphasize that this is still a priority.

Though canceling classes for a full day is not on the table for most of us, a department event that allows faculty to listen to students and better understand the student experience followed by a commitment to make changes could go a long way. We can learn so much by listening to students, and this is something that we can do inexpensively if we set aside some time and make an inviting space. Of course there are some changes, like diversifying the faculty, that will take significant institutional resources and will. However, there are things that we can do to make our classes more inclusive that are more on the order of small tweaks that any of us can implement that can have immediate impact. The conversations around inclusive teaching on my campus have really changed me, and I think they are well worth having.



Jessica Sidman

### Credits

Author photo is by Jordan Tirrell.

## Teaching at a Community College<sup>3</sup>

It is a bit strange to think that this is my sixth year teaching at a community college. I am not sure how I feel about that. In some ways, I still feel as if I’ve just started. Each semester is a different experience, even if I’ve taught the same courses many times. In other ways, I feel very experienced. I have notes and lecture schedules prepped for a majority of the math courses offered at my college. One thing that I am sure about, though, is that I am a completely different professor now than I was my first year.

When I was in graduate school, teaching was not as much of a priority for me. I was in a research-oriented environment. My main focuses (and that of my professors and peers) were working on unsolved math problems and publishing and sharing the results. This was, of course, expected, as I was obtaining my mathematics PhD at a university.

My department did require graduate students to take a teaching seminar before we became teaching assistants and instructors, which was helpful for me. However, my teaching experience at the university was extremely different from my current experience at a community college. Many of my students at the university had honed their study skills, were confident in their prerequisite knowledge, and only had to focus on their education. In contrast, students at a community college may not have developed their study skills and mathematical foundations. They also sometimes work full-time jobs (or several part-time jobs) and regularly deal with personal issues that prevent them from being able to focus solely on their education.

Toward the end of graduate school, I realized that I didn’t see myself in a research-focused career. So, I decided to apply to jobs in both industry and academia (mostly at liberal arts colleges that were more focused on teaching). I ended up with job offers in both industry and academia. Since I was always curious if I could survive in industry, I chose industry. However, after just a year, I realized that my true calling was to be in the classroom. I wanted to be focused on teaching, so I applied to community college teaching positions. Six years later, I am still glad that I made the switch.

I recently sat on my first hiring panel, and I realized that I was very lucky to be offered a position the first time that I went through the hiring process. From my experience, I’ve learned that even the same math department can be looking for different qualities in candidates depending on the year and the people on a particular hiring panel.

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There are some qualities that all successful candidates tend to have in common, though. Having teaching experience at a community college is preferable. However, I don't think it is as important as most people would think. I favor candidates who show strong knowledge in a variety of math courses (from elementary algebra to calculus) during the in-person interview. Knowing statistics is a bonus. I also pay special attention to teaching demonstrations during interviews, since being able to convey mathematical concepts clearly is an integral part of a professor's job.

One of the most important qualities that I look for, though, is experience with a diverse student population. Community college students tend to come from extremely varied socio-economic backgrounds and are in various stages in life (some have just finished high school and some are coming back to school after thirty years). Teaching students with such a wide range of educational and life experiences is a challenge, to say the least. So, it's nice to know that a potential hire has experience with students with varied math and personal backgrounds.

At my college, a typical teaching load per semester is twenty contact hours per week (fifteen hours in the classroom and five office hours). Besides teaching, faculty are expected to participate in department committees that develop and review course curricula. There are also campus-wide committees, such as the Academic Senate or the Distance Education Committee, that faculty may join if they wish. So, there are plenty of opportunities to be involved with projects outside of the classroom if one so chooses.

Over the years, the aspect of my job that I've enjoyed the most is getting to know my students personally, listening to their stories, and being able to help them achieve their goals. I've learned about my students' struggles as immigrants who have had to learn English and work full-time to support their families while attending school. I've heard about their dreams to be the first to graduate college in their families. I've listened to veterans who are readjusting to student life after coming back from serving our country. I've encouraged students not to give up because they don't remember basic math concepts right away after decades away from school. I've pushed students to stop thinking they are not "smart enough" to do well at math just because they have been told or felt that at some point in school.

The most rewarding conversations, though, are the ones in which former students tell me that they are going to graduate and what their futures entail, like plans to transfer to a four-year college or start a new job. These conversations have always kept my motivation tank full and made me grateful to be part of their journeys.

When I first started, I was very focused on teaching math and not as much on getting to know my students. However, I've since realized that the charm of teaching at a community college is, well, the community. I'm not just there to impart mathematical knowledge. I'm there to listen to and

understand my students' struggles, and guide them in their journeys to achieve their educational and life goals. I'm continually evolving as a professor, and always in awe of what my students can achieve despite life's obstacles. Teaching at a community college is a challenging, but rewarding experience, and I look forward to many more years of it.



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### Credits

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